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EXPEDITION VEGA : VOLUME 2 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN NEO
Michael Marcus Thurner
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Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 6 [Complete]

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Episode 11: The Battle for Ferrol

By Michael Marcus Thurner

1.

Perry Rhodan

Above Ferrol

Cracking and clanging resounded. It was a struggle to keep his eyes focused on the holos. He was thrown back and forth in his chair. The artificial gravity generated by the *Good Hope*, the Arkonide technical marvel, was dropping out over and over.

Someone screamed in shock. A woman—Anne Sloane or Darya Morozova. Someone flew through the command center, slammed against the side wall, then slid down as if in slow motion and lay motionless on the floor.

Rhodan's teeth chattered; all his senses were confused. The vibrations that had taken hold of the ship's hull ran through his body. He felt nausea and a kind of headache he'd rarely experienced before.

You're a test pilot! You've been through worse than this and come out on top! You can cope with this!

But everything was different this time. He was damned to sit still while the Arkonide Thora did what she could to bring the spacecraft under control.

"You have to get out of here, Rhodan!" the woman cried. "We don't have much time left!"

He turned to her. Thora was placid in her formchair. She ran her hands across the virtual control consoles as her gaze wandered from one holo to the next.

Rhodan took in the images showing the planet called Ferrol. He saw a surface covered with bodies of water and formidable jungle landscapes. Red dots marked settlements, centers of civilization, and other features that could serve as landmarks.

Even now, when the *Good Hope* was crashing and was little more than a wreck already, the ship functioned better than anything Earth's engineers had ever constructed.

Thora looked calm and focused. Unaffected by what was happening around her, she took action to try to save the ship. *Pretty impressive.*

The *Good Hope* creaked and groaned. Metal warped; somewhere, something collapsed. More damage reports flickered on the holos, conveying that the ship had suffered severe structural damage. An unnerving number of lights flared up on the holographic consoles in front of Thora. The defensive shield disintegrated.

"I trust you!" Rhodan said. "I know you can do this!"

For a few seconds, quiet returned. Even the vibrations abated.

"There is no choice but to abandon ship," Thora said calmly. She waved in the direction of Ras Tschubai. "Your people should do what they're here for."

One of the holos showed their pursuer. An eight-hundred-meter giant of Arkonide construction manned by Topsidans they couldn't shake off. The silence gave way to a crunching and banging and cracking even louder than before. The end was near.

The Titanic is sinking, Rhodan thought. *The unthinkable is happening.*

He pulled himself together. "Tako, take Anne and Darya. Ras, take Wuriu and Alexander. Set them down on Ferrol and then come straight back here. Understood?"

Both nodded and got out of their chairs. Another jerk knocked them off their feet. The Japanese man recovered with a fluidity that spoke of a highly developed sense of balance and perfect mastery of his body. The muscular Sudanese man stumbled, rolled over, then got back to his feet in one fluid motion.

"Under no circumstances can you stay in your battledresses!" Thora warned. "As soon as you set foot on the planet's surface, take

them off and destroy or hide them. The Topsidans will detect you otherwise."

"Understood."

Kakuta grabbed Anne Sloane and pulled her with him over to Darya Morozova, who had slid out of her seat and was staring forward with vacant eyes. He breathed deeply, then vanished along with the two women.

Wuriu Sengu grasped the hand offered by Tschubai, while Alexander Baturin hesitated and pulled back from the teleporter. The Sudanese man bared his flawless teeth. This could be taken as a smile but also as a threat—and the Russian clearly saw it as the latter. He pulled himself up and touched Tschubai on the shoulder.

Then they were gone. Just like that, as if by magic, all by the power of their own minds.

More explosions rocked the ship; more functions shut down. Emergency lighting replaced the command center's regular lighting, which had been slightly too glaring to suit Arkonide needs. A pungent smell filled the room, irritating Rhodan's throat and making him cough. A flame burst out of an encapsulated unit and was doused by foam from the narrow nozzles of the extinguishing system.

What was keeping Ras and Tako? Had the jump exhausted them too much to return to the *Good Hope*? Were they unable to locate the ship with their strange senses?

Then out of the blue, the Japanese man appeared right next to him. As always, Rhodan gave a start. Tako Kakuta staggered and leaned against him. The mutant's left eye was bloodshot. A blood vessel had burst, no doubt from the heavy strain of the two jumps.

Rhodan supported him before losing his own balance. "You have to take Rod and Conrad," he shouted into the man's ear. "Can you do it?"

"Hai." The man looked past him with glazed eyes and gave a

hint of a bow. As the chaos around them grew ever greater, reached an even more alarming scale, he staggered over to the two astronauts, took them by the arms, and prepared himself for one more teleport.

Hurry up, get them away from here!

Rhodan watched, mesmerized, hardly interested in what was happening around him. What mattered, the *only* thing that mattered, was that the *Good Hope*'s crew members were saved.

The teleporter balled his hands into fists, closed his eyes, and then quickly opened them again. Irritated, he shook his head. It looked like he couldn't quite muster the necessary concentration.

He made a second attempt and managed it this time. The three of them disappeared.

Ras Tschubai appeared. He too looked beleaguered and struggled to keep his footing. However, he fended off the helping hand Rhodan offered and offered a tired smile.

"All good!" he exclaimed.

"Now Chaktor and Thora!" Rhodan instructed him.

"Perry—"

"Just do it! This is no time for a debate."

"I won't make another jump after this. I'll need at least a few minutes' rest." The smile was gone now. The Sudanese man's skin was sallow and lined with deep furrows.

Rhodan nodded. He'd suspected it would come to this. The teleporters' abilities were by no means inexhaustible. Someone would have to stay behind.

"You're going!" said Thora without raising her eyes. "I can keep the *Good Hope* in the air a while longer, maybe even bring it in for an emergency landing."

The shaking was hardly tolerable anymore. Nor was the pungent stench of burning synthetic material. Tears ran down the Arkonide's cheeks; her hands were clenching the sides of the formchair. She was lying. She was completely lost.

"Overruled," Rhodan said decisively. "You're taking Thora with you, Ras."

"You're important, Perry." Thora met his gaze with a strange openness. "You have a vision to fulfill. One Arkonide's fate is nowhere near as important as yours."

Where had these altruistic impulses come from? Had Thora been pretending until now? Did she actually have more sympathy towards him than he thought?

Explosions. A stench. Smoke. The *Good Hope*'s destruction was nearing at an alarming pace. By now, Rhodan had learned to understand the Arkonide warning signals. He knew that the spacesphere wouldn't hold together much longer.

Where was their pursuer? The giant ship wasn't visible on any of the holos anymore. Had they shaken them off to some degree? Now, when it didn't matter anymore?

"You're taking Chaktor and Thora with you," Rhodan said to the teleporter. "That's an order. Is that understood?"

"Yes." Ras Tschubai took a long look at him. Then he added, "I'm sorry, Perry."

The gut punch from the African came as a surprise and shoved the air out of his lungs. He doubled over and gasped for air, coughing, helpless. He could do nothing to fend off Tschubai's grip, could not protest anymore. He was dragged away—away from Thora and over to the Ferron, Chaktor.

Then there was nothing but the pain of dissolving.

"No!" he tried to scream. But the call echored unheard across the tops of the enormous jungle trees that suddenly surrounded him.

Rhodan stood in knee-deep swamp water. He felt sick, his stomach still far from recovering from the gut punch. But he couldn't stand still, not here in an unknown environment with many unknown dangers.

Squelching sounds accompanied him as he pulled up his legs and slowly, step by step, approached a small rocky island in the middle of a wasteland of gray and pale green. He coughed, straining. His lungs felt overtaxed, every breath a struggle.

Ras Tschubai was close by, as was Chaktor. The short Ferron was dragging the teleporter behind him with extraordinary ease. The Sudanese man could hardly breathe; he was drained.

Wheezing, Rhodan reached the island. Twice, he slid back into the brackish water before finding his footing on the rocks and managing to climb up onto the bank, which was only one meter high.

He braced his legs against the ground and reached out to help Chaktor up. The Ferron ignored him. With no visible strain, he climbed up to Rhodan's side, dragging Tschubai up after him.

"You have to get Thora!" Rhodan ordered the teleporter. "Right now!"

Tschubai stared back with an uncomprehending look. He hardly seemed to know where he was and how he had gotten here. Rhodan shook him. He didn't react. Quite the opposite—he collapsed, unable to stop himself. It was a struggle for Rhodan to soften his companion's fall.

Crashes of thunder. The sound of explosions. Gusts of wind that bent the treetops, snapping some or even uprooting them altogether. Instinctively, Rhodan ducked.

The *Good Hope* raced over their heads at a height of around five hundred meters, visible between the trees like strobe lamp images. The ship appeared to move in slow motion. Something broke off in a fireworks display of red and yellow flames, then spun into the depths, where it would crash into the swamp at a safe distance. The

sound of another explosion on the ship reached them with a delay of maybe two seconds. A squall snapped more trees and swept Rhodan and even the Ferron off their feet.

Someone was following the *Good Hope*. Topsidian hunters. Tiny units that raced through the cloud-covered sky and turned impossible-looking corners. They were like insects following their prey to descend on them and suck them dry of every last drop of blood. Flashes streaked across the horizon. Ray beams. Deadly blasts of energy that were reaching for the *Good Hope*, seeking to destroy it completely.

The action shifted away from their location. Within seconds, the hunter and the hunted had left Rhodan's party kilometers behind. The Topsidian units and the *Good Hope* were no longer in sight.

Suddenly, the earth shook. Something drew a swathe of destruction across the jungle. Whatever it was came towards them, bouncing and leapfrogging dozens or more meters into the air. Before Rhodan could even react, it was past them.

Water and soil spurted up, covering them. Rocks flew, torn to shreds by a chunk of metal as tall as a building, no doubt part of their craft's outer hull. Bluish flames like St. Elmo's fire danced across the ground, dying down again straight away; vines and tree trunks hurtled into the air, right up to the tops of the trees that had survived this armageddon.

Rhodan groaned and hung on for dear life anywhere, anyhow. A fist of compressed air pressed him deeper and deeper into the mire. The battledress alone protected him from suffocation.

The noise waned, the wind subsided, the flames died out. An uncanny silence followed. It almost burdened Rhodan's senses even more than the cacophony he had just been forced to endure.

"Stand up!" came Chaktor's deep voice. "We should look for the others and then get out of here. As quickly as possible."

With some effort, Rhodan freed himself from the soil and got to his knees, then his feet. Ras Tschubai was lying next to him on his

back, only recognizable as a body-sized mound on the formerly safe-looking rock island.

Rhodan wiped the mud-caked visor of his companion's battledress and stared into the flickering pupils, which were constantly moving from left to right and back again.

"What's wrong with him?" Chaktor asked.

"I don't know exactly," Rhodan admitted. "Something like hypertonic shock, maybe. Increased pressure in his blood vessels due to the excess strain of teleportation."

Chaktor blinked twice, three times—then opened his mouth to...yawn.

Or was it something else? Rhodan had a hard time reading the Ferron's gestures. They were completely alien to him. On the other hand, the physical similarities of their two species were astounding. At some point he would have to contemplate that. But not now.

"Thora told us to get rid of the battledresses as quickly as possible. We should follow her advice."

The advice of a woman who might already be dead.

Rhodan shoved that thought aside as well. He had to focus on surviving. Surviving in an environment that was totally unknown to him and surely held unimaginable dangers.

He wrestled his way out of the suit, always keeping one eye on Tschubai. The teleporter was breathing shallowly. The flickering of his eyes gradually subsided. His hands were twitching as if he wanted to grab something. As if he were mentally repeating one of the jumps he had triggered with the power of thought.

Tiredness washed over Rhodan as soon as he had peeled himself free of the suit. A tremendous weight bore down on his shoulders; his footing was unsure.

Ferrol's got higher gravity. 1.4 gravos. Instead of eighty kilos, you're now carrying 112 around with you.

“Where are we?” he asked Chaktor, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Derrwash,” the Ferron answered brusquely. “The swamp of Derrwash, which transitions into the wetlands of the same name as you go further north.”

“Meaning?”

“We’re in an area that’s largely uninhabited and only roamed by the Warani.”

“And the Warani are?”

“Swamp Ferrons. Members of a tribe who call themselves Nahina. They have only minimal interest in worldly matters and live a secluded life in the swamps of the northern continent. The state authority exerted by the Thort, my people’s leader, has only peripheral meaning to them. They accept him but no one else from the council of ministers, let alone any members of the county government of Porean, to which they are theoretically subordinate.”

“Will they help us?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Swamp Ferrons are unpredictable.”

Rhodan equipped himself with a practical selection of supplies. Food, water, a knife, bandages, other small items—and the translator. This tool was imperative for all contact with the Ferrons.

A cylindrical aircraft crossed the sky, leaving a glowing yellow trace behind it. The impression of an angry insect was amplified further. The Topsidian hunter was undoubtedly searching the ground for survivors of the crash.

For them.

Rhodan fumbled with the clasp of Tschubai’s suit. Valuable seconds passed before he managed to deactivate the opening mechanism and could begin to peel the teleporter out. White spots were dancing before his eyes, and he was grateful when Chaktor helped with the sweat-inducing work.

“Now to get rid of the things,” he said, having barely managed to free the woozy man from the battledress. “The best thing to do is sink them in this swamp as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll take care of that.” Chaktor picked up the outfits and jumped off of the island with remarkable ease. He used wide, springing steps that looked laughable to a human yet conveyed a strange elegance.

Soon, he was gone from Rhodan’s lines of sight. Around him, deadly silence reigned, which was suddenly broken by an energetic bird’s caw. He gave a start and looked around, alarmed. Even the smallest insect or the tiniest predator could pose a danger to him and Tschubai.

Rhodan shuddered. *That’s not even counting the dangers we can’t see. Bacteria. Water that’s not suited to our metabolism. Infectious diseases.*

Tschubai abruptly sat up. He groaned, twisted his face in pain, and laid a hand on the right-hand side of his rib cage. “What…”

“Stay calm. Everything’s fine,” Rhodan lied. “We landed safely on Ferrol.”

The teleporter looked around, trying to get his bearings. “I can remember the jump here. But the environment looks different. Devastated.”

With a few words, Rhodan explained what had happened in the last few minutes. Despite his annoyance, he avoided going into any detail about Tschubai’s insubordination aboard the *Good Hope*.

He should have brought Thora here, not me!

The Sudanese man got to his feet, wheezing with the effort. “What now?”

“We look for the others. Do you remember where you dropped off Wuriu and Alexander? And do you know what direction Tako jumped in?”

Tschubai turned around in a circle. He shook his head. “I finished both of my jumps as close together as possible.” He shrugged helplessly. “I can’t explain how I know, but I know that both of them are less than a kilometer from here. I have to get an overhead view. Maybe I should teleport onto one of the giant trees that are still standing and look around from there?”

“Leave that for now. Save your energy for an emergency.”

“How do you plan to find our people, then? Without a com unit or any kind of detection system?”

“In the olden days, they located each other by shouting.” Rhodan smirked, although he was definitely not in any mood for that.

Chaktor came back. His body was drenched in mud, his hair standing up at odd angles. His sturdy legs were barely immersed in the brackish water. When he reached the island, he was not breathing even a smidgen faster than before.

“All taken care of,” he said. “I’ve hidden the suits.”

“Where?”

“In a pool. Deep enough that they can’t be detected anymore.”

“You *went under?*”

“Bog diving is a popular sport among our youth.”

Interaction with the Ferron was proving to be more than a little confusing. Their ways, customs, behaviors, their whole habitus—the longer Rhodan was involved with Chaktor, the more alien he seemed. Compared to the Ferron, even Thora and Crest felt like familiar friends.

Thora…

Had she survived? Had Tako Kakuta found the energy to go back onto the *Good Hope* and bring her to safety?

Squelch. Squelch. Squelch.

Chaktor gestured for them to duck down to the ground. “Predators!” he whispered and turned around in a circle. “Possibly Laifah!”

What the hell were Laifah? Rhodan glanced around, freezing cold as he hunkered down in the mire. Here and there, he thought he could see movement. A ripple in the water’s surface, vines and branches hanging in a different direction than they had been seconds ago.

Rhodan’s imagine was playing crazy tricks on him. He thought he could a see a monster rising out of the mud, its mouth opened wide to reveal hundreds of teeth ready to devour them.

Squelch. Squelch. Squelch.

Chakor looked annoyed. Unsure. He held a rock in his hand, a weapon that seemed laughable considering the dangers that might lurk here.

“Perry! Finally!”

Two figures slid out from behind one of the toppled jungle giants, coasting over the tangle of roots and towards them, partly swimming, partly wading waist-high through the mire.

Alexander Baturin and Wuriu Sengu. The Russian had a reserved look about him, while the Japanese man showed his usual secretive smile.

Chaktor stood up and threw the stone aside. He bared his teeth in a snarl, no doubt as a sign of his relief.

Rhodan jumped into the water and waded towards the two men, happy to know his companions were alive. “How did you find us?”

“Ask this guy!” Baturin gestured to Wuriu. “He saw you.”

Rhodan nodded. He should have figured. The Japanese man had the unique gift of being able to see through solid matter. To him, trees, rocks, and mud were like gauze curtains that limited visibility. The farther he looked, the blurrier his vision became. It

had been good enough to find them in this jungle landscape, however.

He offered Wuriu a hand and pulled the man up after him. The mutant looked completely exhausted. It wasn't just the march there that had taken its toll on him. He had probably pushed his ability beyond reasonable limits.

The four humans hugged each other. It was a moment of seldom-known intimacy. They were alive. And they weren't alone on this alien world. They could lend each other strength.

"Did you see Tako and the others?" Rhodan asked after a while.

Wuriu shook his head.

"That's a shame." Rhodan hid his disappointment as best he could. "Then we'll look for them now." He turned to Chaktor. "We have to find the wreckage of the *Good Hope*. Maybe then—"

Something flew over their heads at an absurd speed. It happened so fast that Rhodan only just made out that it was cylindrical. Before he could react in any way, the jungle was in flames a few hundred meters away. Then came the sound of an explosion, then the shock wave.

All of a sudden, he felt light, so light... He flew through the air in a somersault, then collided with something that broke under his weight, possibly a tree branch. He fell, rapidly picking up speed—falling much faster than he would have done on Earth.

He landed in swamp water and was swallowed up by it. The mire consumed him. He thought he had hit the ground, but then he sank even deeper. He felt a tremendous pressure on his rib cage. He wanted to cough, wanted to breathe in, but he was stuck in this damn sludge that wouldn't let him go. Worse, he had lost his bearings. Which way was up and which was down?

An pppressive fear came over him. Not for the first time that day.

Just don't panic, Perry! You were chosen for the Moon mission

because of your prudence. And because you can find your way in the most unlikely situations.

Beneath him was tumult of sludge. Bubbling. Washing of waves. He threw his arms out and shifted his position so that down was up. His lungs burned, desperate for fresh oxygen. He didn't have much time, especially since the weight pressing on his body seemed to be increasing.

He felt for the ground with his legs, but there was nothing there. He had to swim. Had to fight his way upwards with powerful swings of his arms and legs. If only he could open his eyes and orient himself! But the mass around him was too heavy, too thick, to make out anything anyway.

Rhodan extended his arm. His hand left the water—he had almost made it!

With a level of exertion that he wouldn't have thought himself still capable of, he shoved his head up into the open air. Gasped for breath. Coughed. Disregarding the blazing heat all around him, he crossed his arms and pedaled with his feet to avoid sinking into the depths again.

He looked around. To his right was a wall of flame. Glowing sparks scattered across the swamp water all around like remnants of an exploded firework. Ashes were raining down too, and clumps of mud that had been flung into the air.

The rocky island was to Rhodan's left, barely recognizable anymore. The torpedo-shaped object had been targeting the piece of ship that had hurtled past them. The Topsidans—he assumed it had come from the lizard who were after them—had not allowed even the tiniest risk. They were destroying everything with any connection to the *Good Hope*.

Rhodan clung to an aerial root and breathed deeply. The tree, which easily had a diameter of three meters, had broken off like a matchstick at less than five meters up. The trunk lay diagonally in front of him in the mire.

Another explosion sounded. Somewhere above the treetops, a bloom of flame emerged. Rhodan held on to the root network as best he could. A current rose beneath his legs. Not far from his position, it gurgled into an ever-growing funnel.

The Topsidans were heedlessly unleashing violence that heavily damaged this planet's natural environment. It was clear that they were cruel and remorseless.

Eventually, the flames died out; the undertow by his legs gradually subsided. Rhodan pressed a hand over his nose and blew to rid his ears of the constant pressure that he'd felt since their emergency landing. The stupor and headache subsided a little, but the chaos all around him remained.

"Ras? Wuriu?" He called for his companions, shouting one name after another. He could barely hear his own voice. It sounded like it came from far in the distance. The cracking of cooling wood and the bubbling sound of the mudflow made it difficult to hear anything.

"Here!"

Rhodan looked to the side. About fifty meters away, Chaktor was drawing attention to himself. He was balancing on a gigantic snapped-off tree trunk floating away from Rhodan. The Ferron had two humans with him who were just sitting up in a daze. Tschubai and Baturin.

Another torpedo shot past them overhead. Rhodan was too tired to react or even consider what he could do in the face of the lizards' destruction. In humility, he closed his eyes and waited for the unavoidable. For the noise and sound waves and wrought-up mud that would swallow him up and never let him go.

But nothing happened. By all appearances, the Topsidans were only conducting a recon flight. Perhaps they were looking for heat signals—a difficult endeavor given the many hot spots everywhere that were only slowly dying down, and the fact that Rhodan and his companions were covered head to toe in cooling mud.

Then came silence. Deathly silence, like in a zone of absolute destruction. If anything was still alive here, it was keeping very quiet.

"Your companions are well," Chaktor called to him after a while. "Even your friend with the strange hairstyle is alive. I retrieved him out of the nutrient water over there." He pointed behind him.

Nutrient water... A strange expression. The translation tool had clearly been unable to come up with a suitable equivalent.

"Fetch him. I'll come over as well."

Chaktor assented with a sound that resembled a belch. Rhodan clambered from one root to the next. The end of the tree trunk Tschubai and Baturin were sitting on was no more than ten meters away from him. He felt for solid ground with his feet and found success. Soon he stood waist-high in the mud. If he strained and put one cautious foot in front of the other, he should be able to reach the others in time, before the downed tree turned away.

Every step became torture. Sweat dripped into his eyes and blended with rough sand, obstructing his vision. He could hardly see where he was going. His arms were heavy; his chest hurt.

The tree was floating past him at a slow and stately pace. Tschubai had slid over to the end nearest to Rhodan and was offering a hand while he himself was being held on by the Russian cosmonaut.

And he was still one meter too far away. Rhodan was stuck. His legs wouldn't come off the ground anymore. He lacked the energy to take a single step.

What am I even doing here? Why didn't I stay on Earth, where I'm needed far more urgently, where I have to make the vision of a united mankind into a reality as quickly as possible?

Something—or someone—splashed into the water next to him. Chaktor. The alien paid no mind to the fact that he quickly sank, the mire reaching up to his chin. He grabbed Rhodan with the raw

strength afforded to him by the higher gravity he had grown up with.

Effortlessly, he dragged Rhodan over to the tree trunk, which Wuriu was sitting on now as well. With the Ferron's help, Rhodan heaved himself up and gratefully took hold of Tschubai's arms. He laid down on his back. Even the toughest stress training in a centrifuge hadn't drained him like this.

"We'll keep floating until you recover your strength," said Chaktor, who had taken a seat on the tree trunk again.

"That will take too long," Rhodan answered, although he could hardly muster the energy to speak, let alone sit up. "What if the Topsidans come back? They'll find us."

"Right ahead of us is a *Bollog*," the Ferron explained. "It's going to be more turbulent than we would like."

"A Bollog? What's..." Straining, he raised his head and followed Chaktor's outstretched index finger with his gaze.

He understood. In front of them was a maelstrom drawing in branches, tree trunks, bloated animal corpses of species he didn't recognize, and giant clumps of foliage. It looked ponderous, hardly dangerous at all, especially since they were perched on a truly enormous tree trunk, but looks could be deceiving. Rhodan's senses were thoroughly overstimulated. He was hardly capable of distinguishing danger from safety anymore.

"Let me take care of it," Chaktor offered.

He reached for a passing branch, grabbed it, and used it as a steering pole. Then he balanced nimbly on the other end of the tree trunk. There, he pushed the branch against a collection of roots firmly anchored to the ground and gave their unusual vehicle a new torque, one that Rhodan couldn't make sense of, as it would lead them to the maelstrom even more quickly.

Chaktor swiftly hurried past them all to the other end. He looked around. Waited. And when they floated past a rock, he used his pole

again, pushing off so powerfully that his muscles stuck out under his wet clothes like sturdy ropes. He grunted and groaned and growled, but he didn't let up. He withstood the pull of the undertow until he had turned the tree trunk ninety degrees and was now at a right angle to the maelstrom. Then he stopped and hurriedly pulled back his pole. He spat out liquid and breathed deeply.

"Hold on tight," he said. "If the trunk tips over and you go under water, *do not let go* under any circumstances. Otherwise you'll be swallowed up by the Bollog and lost. I'll turn us back in the right direction, come what may."

The Ferron showed them where and how to latch on. He rammed his fingers into the grooves between wide pieces of bark, ignoring scratches and bleeding gashes.

Rhodan followed his example. The bark was hard, and he only managed to hook his fingers into it on his third attempt. With his legs, he clung to the remains of a branch as firmly as he could.

"Ras?" he called to the mutant. "Couldn't you get us away from here?"

"I'm sorry, Perry," his companion groaned. "I'm not up to the task yet."

They had to trust in Chaktor. In his strength and skill.

The Bollog was close. It dragged their tree trunk forward with a jerk. From the wind disheveling his hair, Rhodan felt the force of the undertow and the speed with which they were now moving.

"The angle is too shallow!" he cried to Chaktor. "We're heading straight into the Bollog!"

"I know what I'm doing!" Chaktor replied. The Ferron stood there, legs wide, and balanced out the shaking tree trunk with enough dexterity that you'd think he had spent his entire life doing nothing but steer wooden rafts through jungle landscapes.

This could never work, never! The Bollog was right there. The front end—their end!—of the trunk was about to plunge into a hole

that now, this close, looked like an abyss of nothingness. It led down at least fifteen meters into a blackness with *something* lurking in the middle. The thing had tentacles, which it greedily stretched out towards everything that fell into the maelstrom. Reached towards them.

The trunk tipped. They plunged into the deep. Rhodan clawed his fingers as deeply into the trunk as firmly as he could and pressed his head against the wood. Something whipped past him. A tentacle, slippery and sharp-clawed, tearing forearm-length splinters out of the wood. A trunk tipped to the side, sliding ever closer towards the center of the Bollog.

He raised his head. Chaktor still stood upright, balancing out the jerky spinning and tilting motions of their vehicle. Suddenly, he stuck his pole into the muddy water, met resistance there, and gave the trunk a small, almost imperceptible impulse that suddenly sent them up again, up out of the Bollog, and flying high through the air!

The trunk was easily fifteen meters long. It had to weigh several tonnes. And yet, it shot through the air like an arrow, carried by its own momentum, before splashing down into the water again some distance from the Bollog. There, it practically buried itself in the solid ground at least four meters below.

The tree trunk rotated to the side. Rhodan was suddenly lying at an angle. He slid into the brackish water, sinking and being washed up again, two, three times.

Chaktor called something the translation tool didn't translate. Maybe cursing, maybe a prayer. Rhodan could not have reasonably explained how they were suddenly floating in safe, calm water and were on the upper surface of the trunk again, with plenty of air to breathe. He was coughing and spluttering, and close to collapse—but alive.

Silence.

And then: quiet, unperturbed birdsong.

Chaktor said, “Welcome to Ferrol.”

2.

Tako Kakuta

Ferrol

He was completely exhausted. Ferrol's higher gravity had possibly taken a greater toll on him, with his physique and teleportation ability, than it would on other humans.

He clasped Rod Nyssen's and Conrad Deringhouse's hands and pictured the place where he had left the two women behind. A rocky desert. Low trees. A brook with grey-green water bordered by pale reeds half a man's height. In the far distance stood mighty mountain ridges with snow-capped peaks.

He had to find that place again with the power of his mind, even though the *Good Hope* had moved several kilometers by now, taking twists and turns to avoid its Topsidian pursuers.

He thought of Feng Shui, of his own personal version of the harmonization of his being with the environment. Of the *Lo Pan*, his internal compass, which he was using more and more to come to terms with his uncanny powers and vectorize them properly. This method still had room for improvement, but it increasingly helped him to activate his gift in a purposeful way.

Tako Kakuta constructed his inner coordinate system. This took a few seconds. Then he opened his eyes and cast one last glance at those present. The Arkonide, proud and controlled as ever, acted as though she weren't paying attention to him. Perhaps that would be the last time he ever saw her face. It didn't take a mathematical genius to see that either Thora or Perry Rhodan had to stay behind on the *Good Hope*. His powers would surely not suffice for another two teleports.

He jumped with the two American astronauts in tow at the exact moment another explosion shook the ship. The equalization, the dissolving into nothingness, the nonexistence that lasted only the

blink of an eye—by now, he was used to it. Not Nyssen and Derringhouse, however. When they reappeared on Ferrol's surface, they took a few shocked steps away from him before gradually getting a hold of themselves.

Kakuta had ended his jump beautifully. Anne Sloane and Darya Morozova were waiting about twenty meters away. The two women waved at him. They were crouching behind a single standing tree whose foliage extended far over a rock, forming a kind of hiding place.

"Rod," said Deringhouse. He looked at his friend and colleague, bewildered. "I feel dizzy."

"That'll pass, don't worry," said Nyssen. "The increased gravity means—"

He stopped short and rushed over to Deringhouse, who had sunk to the floor in slow motion, his eyes rolling, falling like an ungainly sack, unable to even find the strength to break his fall with his hands.

Kakuta followed the American as quickly as the unfamiliar conditions allowed. He saw the blood. Bright red blood, spurting out of the man's body in time to his pulse. His battledress had torn and become nonfunctional. With Ferrol's gravity weighing him down, several shards had pierced him and pushed into the robust material far enough to perforate it in many places. Metal pieces that had no doubt come from the last explosion on the *Good Hope*.

"Get his suit off, quick!" said Nyssen, fumbling with his friend's chest clasp. Deringhouse's face suddenly looked pale and sunken. The life was rapidly flowing out of him.

Kakuta gingerly slid the helmet off the American's head. He saw the life-threatening wound and knew there wasn't much they could do here. A shard as long as a hand had bored into his neck and damaged the artery there.

"A compress!" he ordered Nyssen.

The astronaut was dismayed. He looked like he might be sick at any moment. But he responded to Kakuta's words. Fumbling, he pulled a towel from his suit's outer pocket and handed it over.

Kakuta folded it and pressed it against the left and right sides of the entry point. It wouldn't stop the bleeding, but it would hold it back for a little while. He had to think. Had to consider what they could do to help their crewmate with the limited means at their disposal.

The two women were approaching. Darya Morozova, a pragmatist with an eye for the essentials, helped Nyssen to remove the injured man from the battledress. More wounds came into view, also caused by shards of metals.

"Flesh wounds. Nothing life threatening," she said curtly, moving Conrad into the recovery position.

Now, Kakuta could examine the throat wound more easily. *Think!* He urged himself. *You've always found a solution before. Otherwise you'd have perished in your homeland, in Fukushima, or would have fallen victim to Clifford Monterny later on.*

"Anne?"

"Yes?"

The inconspicuous-looking woman, who had so far kept her distance from the injured man, stepped closer.

"I'm going to pull out the shard now, and you will seal the wound with your powers. Understood?"

"Do you know what you're asking of me?" Sloane turned pale. Even paler than usual.

"I know you can do it. I've watched you doing your finely detailed work."

Sloane had telekinetic powers. She could control matter with the power of her mind. Could make things float, go for an enemy's throat with invisible hands, influence luck in her favor at the

roulette table.

“If I’m one centimeter off, I might snap the carotid artery and kill him.”

“He’s as good as dead already. Without your help, he doesn’t stand a chance.” Kakuta made his voice as cold and detached as possible. Let her quietly loathe him. The main thing was that she focused on her task and did her best.

“All right, then.” She kneeled down and squinted, focusing.

“I’ll take the shard out now. The wound will get bigger. It will look ugly.”

“Just do it already!”

Kakuta grasped the metal between his thumb and forefinger and pulled. It gave a surprising amount of resistance. He had to gently move the shard back and forth before it came unstuck and slid out. Even more blood spurted out, splashing onto him and Anne.

“Do it!” he demanded.

Anne moved her lips but didn’t say a word. All of her focus was on the ugly wound in Conrad Deringhouse’s neck. She reduced the tear in the artery, gently and with a calm collectedness that he couldn’t help admiring. As if by magic, flaps of skin laid themselves over one another so firmly that there was hardly even a scar to be seen.

“It’s not a long-term solution,” she cautioned him, straining.

“It doesn’t have to be. You just have to keep him stable long enough for us to find something better. For us to come across indigenous people who can help us.”

“Are you going to teleport and look for them?”

“Later,” he replied evasively, fighting back a feeling of shame. He was far too exhausted to manage another jump right now. But he couldn’t and wouldn’t admit that to the others. They might have

interpreted it as weakness.

You're dealing with foreigners! Kakuta reminded himself. *Their sense of honor is attuned completely differently.*

And yet...he couldn't step outside of his own skin. Not yet. It would change everything if only he spent enough time in the city of Terrania, in that metropolis on the rise, which would lead humanity to a glorious future.

He digressed. He had to take care of the gravely injured man. Sloane appeared to have the situation in hand. What now?

They needed help. Rhodan, maybe? No. They had absolutely no idea where the others had teleported to.

Deringhouse gave a shriek. He grasped at his chest, foam coming out of his mouth.

"His heart!" said Nyssen, waving his arms frantically. "I think he's having a heart attack! The shock. The pain. The high gravity. We have to...have to..."

"Anne! Deal with it!"

Sloane cast an angry glance at Kakuta. She felt used, and no doubt she didn't like being ordered around by him. But she was on the case again straight away. She looked down at the injured man, murmured a few words, and moved the fingers of both hands as if to strengthen her concentration even more.

Kakuta pictured the way she was grasping at Deringhouse's heart with her gift, taking it into a telekinetic hold, and starting to massage it. Much better and much more targeted than regular chest compressions would have been.

She worked with a surgeon's precision, stroking the heart delicately as if with a feather, gently pressing blood out of the life-giving organ to restore his circulation. In the release phase, the blood would stream back as if into a sponge.

In recent days, they, the mutants, had gone through multifaceted

training. In addition, they had developed a few guidelines for themselves and striven to improve their abilities, to sound out which applications might be possible.

A teleporter was limited. But someone like Anne Sloane could destroy things—and also repair them.

The dark-haired women's veins bulged visibly at her temples. She was reaching the limit of her abilities.

Deringhouse wheezed. He tried to raise his upper body, then fell powerlessly to the ground again. He was back! He spat blood and phlegm, coughing intensely.

"Can you hear me?" Nyssen gently clapped his friend on the back. "You have to stay calm. Breathe evenly." In a fragile voice, he added, "You'll be back to your old self again soon, I promise."

Deringhouse didn't answer. He simply lay there and stared with glazed eyes, plagued again and again by coughing fits.

"I can't keep this up for long." Anne gestured to the man's carotid artery, which was now her primary focus again. "Can you imagine how difficult it is to...to grab in the right place?"

"Do what you can for as long as you can."

"We have to look for Rhodan," Morozova interjected.

"No," Kakuta insisted. "We have to make sure we get away from here as quickly as possible." He gestured towards the overcast sky. "The Topsidans' ships are on the hunt. Are we going to draw their attention by getting closer to the wreckage of the *Good Hope*?"

"We can't just abandon the others!" the Russian woman protested. "We'll be much stronger together!"

"And how exactly are we supposed to find them?" These words weren't easy for Kakuta to say. He had to think pragmatically, which matched his nature...and would draw the others' ire. But their safety was priority number one. Nothing else mattered.

He pointed to the brook. At the reeds that bent in the gentle breeze but didn't break. He had spent his youth crafting usable things out of the simplest materials.

"Bring me as much of that stuff as possible," he said.

"What for?" asked Morozova.

"I'll build a stretcher for Conrad. Go!"

She and Nyssen haltingly got to work. Sloane stayed at the wounded man's side. Her lips formed silent words. She was fully focused on keeping him alive.

In his home prefecture, an injured man like this would have been presented with a knife and left behind. He would have known what to do. But Kakuta had learned a lot...at Camp Specter, then later as one of Monterney's men, and above all in Terrania as a trusted ally of Perry Rhodan, who emanated something he couldn't quite comprehend. It stirred something in his belly and heart.

Kakuta thought of the words Rhodan had used to commemorate the opening of a new street in their city of the future: "We are humans. We belong together. We protect each other and take care of one another. No one will be disadvantaged or favored based on their skin color, their religion, or their political views. Anyone who isn't prepared to follow these basic ethical ground rules is free to leave Terrania. There is nowhere for people like that in this place, which stands for a better future."

Few words, haltingly arranged. But *true* words. Rhodan always seemed to say and do the right thing in a way that Kakuta couldn't quite grasp.

"We'll get you through this, Conrad," he whispered into the former astronaut's ear. "Whatever happens."

Anne Sloane was adamant about keeping her battledress on. Only after a long and heated discussion was she convinced that the protective suits would do them more harm than good. In no way could they exclude the risk of being detected by the Topsidans.

Still, Anne's fierce opposition gave Kakuta some doubt. Had he actually made the right call? They would be confronted by unfamiliar environmental conditions. 1.4 gravos. Air that felt thick, tight and oppressive when you breathed it in. The colors were different from those on Earth, as were the smells. Even his field of vision had changed.

With great effort, they fashioned a stretcher for Deringhouse. Two branches with ends trimmed to provide a good grip; between them, three layers of reeds braided together. The tubing was firm and tough, but also flexible enough to make a reasonably comfortable bed for the injured man. The material would hold for a while as long as they poured water on it every so often to keep it pliable.

Rod Nyssen went in front, Kakuta behind. Morozova swapped in when there were difficult stretches to get past—and there often were. Sloane concentrated entirely on her task of keeping Deringhouse alive. She hardly left his side for even a moment.

They deactivated the protective suits and buried them under some rocks. The Topsidans were focusing their search on survivors of the crashed *Good Hope*, hence surely on the swampy landscape they could see the edges of below. Here and there stood tight groups of giant trees, leaving space for vast bodies of water.

A herd of elephant-like creatures could be seen at the edge of the wet landscape, crossing the waterways on broad feet that left silly-looking footsteps. Birds with long wings accompanied them, occasionally setting themselves down on the thick-skinned creatures to pick parasites out of their creased skin. The birds' piercing shrieks set Kakuta's teeth on edge. They were no doubt a defense against the predators that could be seen lurking in the trees' shadows.

Were their snakes here? Insects that sprayed poison? Where were the animals at the top of the food chain, and how could they combat them without weapons? Had leaving all their modern equipment behind really been a wise choice?

Yes! he silently decided. *The most dangerous predators we'll encounter on this world are, without a doubt, the Topsidans.*

Several times, their enemy's craft appeared on the horizon, tiny ships that shot past at insane speeds, occasionally hunting down flight- and spaceworthy ships of all kinds, the units of the outmanned Ferrons.

A rat-like creature stretched its long, pointed ears out of a burrow. It snarled aggressively before disappearing, then reappeared a short time later between two mounds of rock. It followed them on their strenuous journey for a while until it caught sight of a caterpillar half a meter long with large bulging eyes, at which point it stayed behind, biting into the chitinous body.

Every step was a step into the unknown filled with trials and tribulations. The way was paved with countless surprises and even more dangers. The leaves of flowers resembling violets secreted a painful contact poison similar to that of nettles, while thorny bushes exuded a fecal scent. Fist-sized stones turned out to be the sloughed-off hulls of shedding hedgehog creatures. Their hollowed out insides were filled with sick-green maggots that Kakuta avoided like the plague.

He was unbelievably tired. Every step ate away at his being. He sweated and drank liters of water that might have been contaminated with bacteria his immune system couldn't cope with.

His companions seemed more foreign to him than ever. Anne Sloane, in particular, gave him no end of trouble. Her cultural background, her upbringing in a well-protected home, and her fundamentalist Christian beliefs that shone through every so often had always been alien to him.

Kakuta stopped and got his bearings. He had a rough idea of where they were. While on the ship, he had already given himself a

basic familiarity with this world's geographic proportions, as he had learned to do in early youth. The foothills and suburbs of the metropolis of Thorta had to be beyond the huge mountains before their eyes.

So near, yet so far...

That was where Chaktor had wanted to take them, to the Red Palace, where the *three-eyed one*, the Thort, would receive them. That was where they would most quickly find assistance and where Rhodan would also set his sights.

They continued on their way. Step by step, breath by breath. The mountainous terrain surrounding them grew ever more rugged and forbidden. Every half hour, a cool wind whistled over their heads. Then, in stark contrast, came a warmth given off by the sun, which was mostly hidden behind the clouds. This parched them, made them thirsty.

This was a climate of a kind Kakuta had never known on Earth. Everything here was different somehow. The light spectrum, the temperature changes, the gusts of wind, the air they breathed. And combined with his litter, lanky young Conrad Deringhouse weighed at least 120 kilograms here.

"I need a break!" Rod Nyssen wheezed, and not for the first time. He bent his knees and laid his end of the stretcher on the ground as softly as he could manage.

Kakuta followed the American's example. His shoulders burned, his neck was fully tensed up, and his thighs felt like they were made of mush.

"We've made it four kilometers, maybe four and a half at most," Morozova announced. "It took us about three hours. It'll be dark soon. What will we do then?"

"We march until we can't anymore. Rest up, get a little sleep. And at first light, we keep going." Kakuta didn't go into Sloane's role. She would have to stay awake during the night to ensure Deringhouse's survival.

But maybe that problem would solve itself. The American's face was ash-pale. His lips moved as if in prayer, as if in his mind, he was already on the other side. Kakuta had seen people on the brink of death more than once. This man would soon cross over.

"I thought Ferrol was densely settled," Anne murmured. "On a technological level, the Ferrons are ostensibly a good step ahead of us, but I can't see a sign of that anywhere."

He refrained from sharing his own observations with her. She looked exhausted—and exceptionally nervous. What was true on Earth was not remotely relevant here. They knew as good as nothing about the Ferrons. It was possible their development had taken an entirely different path, and the people here lived in greater harmony with nature than on Earth. Or there were traces of civilization but not of a kind they could recognize. Or they had landed in some kind of nature reserve.

Rocky terrain spread out before them. When they crossed that, it would be just a few steps to the crest of the mountain that was a foothill of the snow-capped peaks. With a little luck, they'd enjoy a good overview from up there and be able to determine their location.

"I'm going to teleport," he said on the spur of the moment.

"You should save your energy," Morozova objected.

"I'm feeling much better now. And I could save us a good chunk of the journey. If we haul ourselves up there only to realize we've been going in the wrong direction, it'll be even worse for all of us."

For Conrad most of all.

"I wouldn't mind a slightly longer break." Nyssen carefully felt the blisters on the inside of his hands.

Sloane was silent. She had undoubtedly heard him, but she treated him with contempt. Why? Had he irritated her with his behavior? Had he said or done something that contravened her worldview?

Kakuta scooped some water out of one of the many streams around them. He drank, focused, and then jumped.

Success. Practically a perfect teleport. He was exactly where he'd wanted to be, at the crest of the mountain.

He staggered. He had to spread his legs wide and bend down to avoid losing his balance. He was exposed to powerful winds that were trying to drag him off the edge with all their might. The change of location had also come with a temperature difference of what felt like ten degrees. It was ice-cold up here.

Kakuta looked into an abyss. It was as if a giant had bitten off half of the mountain and spat it out into the valley. Rock fragments as big as buildings lay distantly strewn across the ground at what had to be at least two hundred meters below. The wall he stood at the edge of was too sheer to walk up, and would be even more impossible with the heavily injured Deringhouse in tow.

"Enough of the bad news," he murmured. "Now for the good news."

Yes, there was cause for hope. To his right, about one kilometer away, he saw some shapes on the wall, moving nimbly like blue insects. They were climbing up with remarkable skill and would soon reach the crest!

Hikers or mountain climbers. That only corroborates the theory that we're in a kind of reserve.

He should have felt relieved. Instead, he was afraid. There was something frightening about an encounter with representatives of a largely unknown people. One wrong word, one mistaken gesture, and he might lose any chance of reasonable discussion.

He had exchanged only a few words with Chaktor on the *Good Hope*. He had no idea how these beings *really* ticked. He knew nothing about their customs, their morals, their habits. They might see him as an enemy. An ally of the Topsidans.

Kakuta wavered. Should he go back to his companions and

attempt the climb with them? Or should he teleport to the climbing party's likely goal, to meet the Ferrons there at the crest?

He chose the latter option. If he acted clumsily or even messed up entirely, at least no one would notice. His honor would remain intact.

He jumped a kilometer. His energy was enough for that much, but then he would have to take a longer break.

Kakuta waited patiently. He maintained a sufficient distance from the point where the Ferrons would climb up over the edge, remaining poised in the half-shadow of a rock fragment that provided a little protection from the intensifying rain showers.

A blue hand appeared. A clattering sound echoed. The Ferron shoved a clamping wedge into a tiny fissure. It spread apart on its own and gave a light signal to show that it could bear weight now.

The alien's head popped up over the edge. He wore a futuristic-looking helmet with an image reflected in its wide visor. The Ferron anchored the rope, pulled on it as if this were a matter of routine, then climbed over the crest.

He made a sound like a laugh. A triumphant laugh of liberation. He called something down into the depths that Kakuta's translation device couldn't interpret. Right afterwards, a second Ferron appeared—a woman with her legs in a kind of frame. She pulled herself up to the top with the strength of her muscular arms and laughed with jubilation as well. The man squeezed her hand, pulled her to him, and activated a mechanism on the underside of the frame.

It transformed before Kakuta's eyes, growing smaller and more compact until it turned into a seat that supported the woman.

She's handicapped! Perhaps paraplegic. She fought her way up this mountain wall with the help of advanced technology and her own upper arm strength! What an accomplishment!

Two more Ferrons climbed over the edge. They too looked satisfied, clapping each other on the shoulders. They untied ropes from body bands that connected them to the woman's climbing frame, threw themselves to the ground, and spat several times in a row.

The translator helped him to understand a few words that the wind blew his way. The four mountain climbers were talking about "the adventure of their lifetime." About a fantastic route and the remarkably safe leader.

Kakuta was baffled. Did these Ferrons not know their homeworld was under siege? Were they denying and repressing the danger? What could be the reason for their buoyant mood?

You already struggle to understand the motivations of your fellow humans and then you wonder about the behavior of members of an alien race? Watch and learn, Tako.

He hesitated. Should he make himself known already? Absent any alternative, he would have to. Deringhouse wouldn't hold out much longer, nor would Anne. He planned out what he would say, positioned the translator in front of his chest, and made to stand up.

That was when he felt the blade of a knife scratching his cheek.

He wanted to teleport himself to safety, but he couldn't. He was too tired and too nervous. He suppressed his range. All his training over the last few weeks had been for nothing. Now, when he wanted to fall back on his powers in an emergency, they didn't work. He still had so much to learn—assuming he ever got the chance.

The Ferron next to him said something. After a brief pause, the translator told him what it was.

"Are you one of *them*? You are, aren't you? One of those *Descheggs* that are occupying our homeworld and want to oppress us? And the member of a fifth column? A spy? Whatever would the admiralty say to you?" The Ferron made sounds that resembled laughter. "Or are you not worth the effort of dragging you with us?"

The knife scratched his skin. Kakuta felt warm liquid running down his cheek.

"You would be a pathetic substitute for all the dead soldiers. But in times like these, one must be satisfied with small victories."

Kakuta received a strike against his temple from behind, forceful and full of anger. He fell to the ground and was left lying on his stomach, defenseless and weak and tired.

"I'm not an enemy," he managed to whisper. "I'm—"

"You're just here by coincidence, right? To visit our wonderful world exactly when we're under attack?"

He saw the Ferron's leg next to him. The man stood above him now. Kakuta tried to turn over, but didn't manage it. The Ferron pressed a knee against his back. The teleporter could barely conceal his fear. One powerful strike to his spine would cripple him.

"No! Please! You must know who and what the Topsidans are, how they look! They are also our—*my* enemies!"

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Not only do I let myself get blindsided like an amateur, but now I'm dragging my companions into misfortune with me. All because I can't keep my mouth shut.

The Ferron paused. The pressure on his back subsided. His opponent took a step back. Consideringly, he said, "So there are several of you. You are on patrol. You're scouting the hinterlands of Thorta to report back to your taskmasters."

Every word pained the teleporter. He was still lying on his stomach, gasping for breath. "Look at me, dammit! I don't bear the slightest resemblance to the Topsidans."

"You're a vassal. A member of a people tributary to them. You were sent here, you and the others. Because the Topsidans think they can distract us. How stupid they are."

He made an imperious hand gesture before Kakuta could say another word. "You will help me lure your companions here. How

many of you are there? Six? Twelve? Are they better equipped than you are? Open your mouth or I'll help jog your memory!"

The Ferron grabbed him by the throat, dragged him up, put him onto his feet, turned him in such a way that Kakuta had to look him in the eye, and that took him out of the half-dark of his hiding place into murky daylight. He brandished the weapon like a madman. The blade vibrated slightly, its tip soaked with his blood.

The Ferron froze. He uttered choking sounds that remained untranslated before drawing back several steps. "I... I didn't know," he stammered.

The woman in the wheelchair approached, the other climbers behind her. She came to a stop right next to her compatriot. She too looked confused, perhaps a little afraid. But something in her demeanor made it clear to Kakuta who was in charge in this group.

She alone came closer. Slowly, and without any regard for the rough ground that shook her body. Then the Ferron woman was right in front of him. She gestured for him to bend down.

Kakuta obeyed without thinking. He felt cold, slack fingers stroking his forehead. Once, twice. Again and again. Then the woman drew back.

She gave a bow and said, "I feel *it*. You can work miracles. Your kind have returned. The light returns!"

The knife-wielder let the weapon he'd threatened Kakuta with fall to the ground and bowed before him respectfully, as did all his companions.

3.

Homer G. Adams

Earth

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” Thus had Klaus Georg Stemp recited. It came from *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare.

That was nearly fifteen years ago, in the rehearsal space of the Theatre Royal. He had looked over the members of his class, one after the other, always with one of his oh-so-meaningful gazes. Then he had sung the praises of the art of theater...for almost an hour.

Stemp was without a doubt a brilliant actor, if a difficult one at times. He was a narcissist and convinced of his own merits to an unbearable degree. He had become a seducer in his old age. A theatrical seducer. He had taught at the Max Reinhardt Institute in Vienna and later at the Actors Studio in New York City.

During Stemp’s last years, Adams had met him at the Old Vic in Bristol and gotten to know and appreciate him. A tireless fighter for the art of acting. A fanatic, thrown into a rage at the slightest provocation. Oh, but he could get *angry* when he was served a glass of ordinary mineral water and not his beloved Perrier. Or if a journalist at the nearby Maiden’s Inn didn’t recognize him at a glance and beg him for a bon mot.

Stemp, had kept to his self-chosen motto until his dying breath and never hesitated to loudly cry the news of his own unbeatable reputation as a master of the stage into the world. Adams had to smile as the preparations for his little charade gradually reached their conclusion. Conversations with Stemp had always been enriching—and a strain on the liver. All too well he remembered a drunken night in the pub as the Austrian spent hours speaking about himself and telling of his stage and film successes in his accent without a “th.” Of his acquaintanceships with the big stars of

a Hollywood that no longer existed. Of blockbusters he had filmed for money and smaller films that had fulfilled an ambition for him.

At one point, Stemp had paused as if he had just awoken from his stupor. He had looked at Adams with a gaze as if he didn't know that this was one of his most important patrons, and had then said, "I talk and talk without letting you get a word in edgeways, Gershwin. I apologise a thousandfold for my impertinence." His words were accompanied by large gestures that swept a half-full bottle of whisky from the wooden tabletop. "Let's talk about you now, dear Gershwin, and of nothing else."

He had always called him Gershwin, treating the name "Adams" with contempt for some reason. Stemp had turned left and right like a conspirator, bent far forward, then, with alcohol-impregnated breath, whispered a question.

"So tell me...what do you think of me?"

Yes, that had been Stemp. Always an egomaniac, always a bundle of energy, often a genius, and only very rarely too drunk to know what he was doing.

And today I need a tiny bit of your talent and your extraordinary acting ability, old friend.

The formidable Stardust Tower reached ever higher into the sky each day. In the inner city, the roofs formed an almost closed lid to offer protection from the hot desert sun. The outer city held functional buildings and construction sites. Beyond that were the ubiquitous tents. People wandered the streets like migrant workers, making themselves useful wherever they were needed. Here and there one of the few Arkonide robots could be seen. They floated around from one of the many building sites to the next. Their bodies glimmered in sunlight that promised warmth and didn't deliver it. It was far too cool for this midsummer day in the Gobi Desert.

Adams turned to the three people he had taken under his wing. Mildred Orsons, Julian Tifflor, and Timothy Harnahan had taken to their task with gusto. He smiled, satisfied. These young people

represented the sort on whom all his hopes rested. He would provide the necessary resources, and Rhodan and Bull would be the ones paving the way to a peaceful future, but these types here would one day control the fate of a united Earth. It came down to the Orsons, Tifflors, and Harnahans of the world.

The stage was slowly taking shape. Two Arkonide robots had erected the scaffold and several trained stage crew had assured the functionality of the structure. The small group that was still beavering away would take care of the artistic design.

Adams pulled out the well-worn pod that had served him for a decade andactivated some files. Videos enlarged themselves, showing in detail who and what the Fantan people were. These were the aliens who had descended on their world like a plague of locusts and set off panic and fear with their sheer strangeness.

There was the Fantan who was strolling through the empty streets of Paris. The city's most notable landmark, the Eiffel Tower, had already been destroyed by Thora. In the outskirts, the *banlieues*, there was turmoil.

The recording was exceptionally shaky; an amateur had posted the videos online. The alien ambled through the streets of the Montparnasse, indecisively flailing his limbs around. At one point the Fantan decided to turn towards a café called La Coupole. No one was in sight except for the barrel-shaped being himself. He gripped a half-full coffee cup, raised it to an opening in his upper half, made sniffing sounds, and then poured the dark brown liquid into another hole on his body. The delicate-looking cup, on the other hand, the Fantan crushed underfoot. After a while, he spat the coffee into a bag he produced out of nowhere, sealed it, and said animatedly, "Besun! Besun!"

Another video, another story. Two Fantan pushed their strange-looking bodies through tall grass, carefully, as if to stalk up on one of the sheep in the background. All of a sudden, they rushed forward, past the shocked animals, and pounced on the rusty trident of a former pitchfork. The cry sounded again: "Besun!"

A third scene popped up on the pod. Footage from a security

camera. A day ago, this had circulated around the world, as it gave a razor-sharp close-up view of a Fantan in 3D quality.

Adams clapped a viewing filter in front of his eyes and watched as the alien entered the City Commerce Bank branch in Springfield/Omaha. The staff jumped up, nosediving to the side with cries of horror. The alien ignored them, instead making a beeline for a woman rummaging around desperately in her handbag. When the alien reached her, she pulled out a bottle of deterrent spray and aimed it at the intruder's upper body. The mixture of irritant gas and rapidly clumping plastic, in common use for years, sprayed over several of the body openings.

The Fantan paid it no mind. He appeared to feel no pain. He laid two of his gripping organs around the woman's neck, jostled at her rhinestone necklace—and then tore open the woman's mouth. A harrowing sound resounded. He broke an incisor out of her upper jaw and let out the now all-too-familiar cry of "Besun!" before leaving the building as if in a hurry.

The woman was bleeding profusely. She emitted a scream that cut Adams to the bone.

This scene had been viewed millions of times by now. Close-ups, censored versions, versions with commentary, versions clearly manipulated to make the already gruesome recording look even more brutal.

"We're ready, Homer."

He flinched, and at the same moment felt annoyed at himself for his lack of self-control. He may have been one of the richest and most influential people on the planet, but he had fears and weaknesses too. He couldn't stand it when someone crept up on him from behind.

"Great," he replied, not letting his feelings show. It wasn't the time to pick a fight with Julian Tifflor due to the latter's clumsy behavior. "Let's get started."

"When?"

Adams glanced again at his pod. The Chinese compass navigation system provided an abundance of excellent images and data. Its tracking of the giant Fantan spacecraft was significantly more precise than the outdated GPS system.

More than 150 of the aliens' "flounders" were currently active. They raced from one place to the next, pausing sometimes to unload a Fantan and take another back on board on the opposite side of the globe. The aliens' behavior remained inscrutable, but it was clear that they were interested in human culture. No equivalent for the word "Besun" had been found in human languages so far, and Adams doubted one ever would be, but after analyzing as many reports about the Fantan as possible, it seemed safe to assume it was related to the "uniqueness" of an item at a specific moment in time.

To these curious beings, a ray of sun dancing across a painting might have more value than the artwork itself. So could the sound of a glass shattering in biting cold or the paint stroke of a two-year-old that resembled writing known to their kind.

Now, with a little luck, Adams would soon find proof of his theory.

"No time like the present!" he said to Julian.

The young American grinned happily and rushed over to his girlfriend, Mildred, lifted her up, and whirled her through the air, spinning on the spot. "Time to get to work, old lady!" he cried, brimming with energy.

Mildred attempted an angry tone when Julian set her down on the small stage's wooden floor, but she didn't succeed. "Still making me mad over being born sixteen days before you, you spring chicken!"

Adams watched the lovebirds' exchange with the amusement of an experienced old man. They teased each other and quarreled. They found each other, they separated again—and when they felt they had begun to drift too far apart, they undoubtedly had sex that shook their little apartment to its foundations.

The relationship wouldn't last. Adams gave them six months; maybe twelve.

"Get a move on!" he called to them, gesturing for the markedly quieter, almost introverted Timothy to get himself ready too. "The next chance will come in about three minutes. I'd like it if we could pull off this plan on the first try."

"Got it, boss."

Julian's exuberance made way for a cool soberness. All of a sudden, he was fully focused on the task at hand. In a way, the boy reminded Adams of Rhodan, and yet he was entirely different from the former astronaut as well.

Mildred activated the high-performance pod that was the linchpin of their little performance.

"Performance" in two senses, Adams added mentally.

He waited until the three young people were in position. Then he activated the pod. The selection of prompts was supposed to seem random, but that was far from the case.

"I was still a child when..." boomed the first prompt from the speakers surrounding the stage.

"...I began to yearn for the stars," Julian added after a brief hesitation.

"It touched me deeply when..."

"...at the age of nine, I experienced a total solar eclipse in Buffalo," Mildred commented.

"My life changed when..."

"...I heard a talk from Tenzin Gyatso, the fifteenth Dalai Lama, in Berkeley," said Timothy Harnahan.

The first round of the pod poetry slam was finished. Using speech recognition, the pod gave scores based on its judgment of

their self-confidence and the quality of their answers. At least, that was how it was supposed to look. In reality, the device was nowhere near advanced enough to decide which arguments held the most weight. Timothy was a few tenths of a point ahead. But who won and who lost was completely irrelevant. All that mattered was that they drew enough attention.

The second round began, then the third. The pod asked about early childhood memories, the meaning of education for the three participants, their most important teachers.

Several Fantan flounders glided over the stage at a low height. They came from the new ship. The larger one. The first had seemingly left Earth behind in a hurry.

This route served as a "pull-in lane" used by the aliens to fly away from the giant craft or return to it. There was no doubt the Fantan could hear what was going on. The aliens' curiosity was well established by now. From everything Adams had learned about them, one Fantan or another would show a response if they patiently continued with their little show.

Twenty flounders sped over their heads; no one was interested. Adams didn't let his disappointment show. *An actor doesn't need an audience,* Stemp had said once. He recalled the man's pathetic words. *He acts for the sake of acting. Once he embraces Melpomene and Thalia, the muses of tragedy and comedy, he never lets them go.*

Mildred, Julian, and Timothy continued. For ten minutes, no flounders were in sight; they bridged the time with empty platitudes. Then, when Fantan auxiliary craft came into view again, they imbued their answers with noticeably more meaning.

People began to draw near... Those who camped in tent cities outside of Terrania's borders and had been drawn in by their orations, which were audible far and wide; adventurers, marauders, the desperate; former soldiers of the Chinese army who had neither defected to their side nor journeyed back to the barracks; members of fringe groups who always gathered at the edges of the light to share a tiny part of the luster. They appeared as if from nowhere—a dozen, then fifty, then a hundred. They sat down and listened.

Adams was prepared. Over the com, he summoned a water truck and had the field kitchen fired up. Contrary to his expectations, the people didn't throw themselves at the highly welcome opportunity to fill their stomachs, potentially for the first time in days. They arranged themselves in neat lines, their heads always turned to face the stage as they listened to the pod poetry slam.

They're hungry, Adams thought. *Not just for food, but for speech. For knowledge and culture. They wanted to listen and find confirmation that they made the right choice to stay here and vegetate at the minimum subsistence level. There is still so much to do. So much...*

None of the aliens paid any attention to the performance. The ships glided onward, from south to north, only to immediately hurtle away in all directions for destinations unknown.

Then one flounder hesitated. It turned around and floated down to Earth, light as a feather. The ship set itself down not fifty meters away from them, kicking sand aside and sending it hissing over their heads. When Adams opened his eyes, the Fantan was right there. He stood directly in front of the stage, which was lined with black velvet now covered in dust. The people nearby gave him a wide berth. They were terrified, but they didn't walk away.

The alien looked strange, even in the context of his people seeming more alien than anything humans had come face to face with before. Skin flaps jutted down from his barrel-shaped lower end, almost dragging along the floor despite his long, thin legs.

"I am on the search..." boomed the pod's computer-generated voice.

"...for the end of the universe, in order to travel beyond it," concluded Julian, voice filled with longing.

That rascal! He's improvising! He's changed his lines against my express orders. If the Fantan bails out now, I'll tear him a new one!

But the alien remained. He moved his arm- and leg-like limbs with the same confusing aesthetic Adams knew from the video footage. And he spoke. He sang. He was absorbed in a dialogue

with himself whose meaning escaped Adams completely. For now, the alien refrained from making verbal contact with them. He no doubt understood the humans' words, but he seemed to place no value on letting them understand his own.

It was Mildred's turn. She too shied away from the script they'd agreed on. She spoke of her wish to make a difference, to accomplish something on Earth and find meaning. Not for her own sake, but because she was firmly convinced that this was her destiny.

Adams restlessly stepped from one foot to the other. This was not going as he had planned! He should have taken more of a hard line with the three of them. From what he knew of Fantan psychology, this one would soon disappear back to his flounder, never to be seen again. Perhaps he'd even mark this place as "uninteresting" so that none of his species interrupted their search for Besun by stopping there again.

Timothy took Mildred's place. Taking the prompt from the pod, he expressed his desire in words that went far beyond what the small group had discussed.

"...to find out whether there are limits for the human mind." he asked, and then immediately gave the answer himself. "I am certain there are not! Up there"—he pointed skywards—"wondrous things are waiting for us that we can't even remotely understand or classify yet. We still have so much to learn before we're ready for the journey that will lead us to the borders of what we can survive, what we can endure, and beyond." He took a well-measured pause, then continued in a reflective tone, "The body may have limits, but not the mind. The mind is free if we allow it freedom of thought. In this freedom—and I believe in it firmly—lies the real challenge that we must take on as humans. Can we set aside all our conceit, prejudice, doubt, and fear? Can we exceed the limits of human existence to find our purpose?"

Silence. Even the ever-present noise of Terrania's building sites sounded suddenly muffled.

Adams exhaled. He had been holding his breath without

noticing. It was not the young man's words that had made such an impression on him, but rather it was his delivery...the ardor, thoughtfulness, and devotion with which Harnahan, just twenty years old, had spoken about things that Adams had barely even considered before.

He was annoyed with himself. During the pod poetry slam, he had ignored the Fantan completely, not paying him a single glance. The alien was still standing in its prominent position near the stage, his body lightly swaying. The long skin flaps scraped across the sandy ground as he made snake-like motions with his "arms."

Timothy stepped back and switched off the pod. This was not as planned either. The device had additional questions saved in it for the three participants to answer.

The silence lingered. At the edges of the crowd, which now measured more than two hundred people, signs of dispersal arose. Men and women took their water sacks, ate the last morsels of their meals, then went back to where they had come from. To the tent cities and the squalid shacks that hardly protected them from the rigors of the local climate.

No one paid attention to the Fantan. They had become indifferent to him. They were busy thinking about other things. About the visions that Julian, Mildred, and Timothy had spread before them, and what part they would play in them one day.

With graceful movements, the Fantan swung onto the stage and stopped in front of Timothy. He said something incomprehensible, flung a coin-sized disc at the youth's chest, and snarled as if trying to provoke him. But Timothy stayed calm. Adams had given him instructions, preparing him for an encounter that might be unlike any in human imagining.

Adams approached the alien from the side and stood next to Timothy while Julian and Mildred stepped closer to the alien. The last remaining audience members stood there, watching the events on stage. Watching the moment they made contact. The most hazardous part of their self-imposed mission. One word, one gesture could be misunderstood and lead to catastrophe.

“It’s not customary to go up onto the stage and harass the performers,” Adams told the Fantan.

The creature gave no sign that he was interested in or even registered Adams’s presence . He stayed “facing” Timothy, touching him while moving his barrel-shaped body.

“I am the organizer of this pod poetry slam,” Adams continued, pressing so close to the Fantan that the alien *had* to register his presence, like it or not. “If you have something to say, then please talk to me.” His heart all but pounded out of his chest. Where in the hell had he found the courage to make a move like this?

The Fantan made one limb slide over Adams’s face almost incidentally. It was a gesture that Adams suspected showed anger. But he stood his ground in spite of the strong odor adhering to the alien.

“Would you like to know something about the pod poetry slam?” Adams probed.

A grinding sound could be heard. The Fantan reached for a belt adorning the middle of his body from which all kinds of technical devices were hanging. From a leather bag, he took out another disc and stuck it to Adams’s chest.

“I want to have the Besun of your compatriots!” boomed a mechanical-sounding voice from the disc. It flawlessly translated the Fantan’s squeaking, sighing, and creaking.

Adams didn’t let his joy and relief show. He had done it! He had made contact! “The Besun is valuable. What will you give me for it?”

“Nothing. We never give anything for it.”

“You steal it, in other words. That does not correspond with our moral principles.”

“Why should that hinder me in taking the Besun?”

“You don’t know how to take it from me—isn’t that right? You

have no idea what it consists of."

"That is exactly what gives it such appeal."

The Fantan now turned fully towards Adams. Timothy and the other two took a step back.

"This Besun is so unique that you can't *take* it, exactly. It's made up of words. Of ideas. Of thoughts. How do you mean to capture and keep it?"

"Tell me, if you can. Otherwise you are of little value to me."

Was the Fantan losing interest? Adams had to improvise, had to keep the alien on the hook. "This Besun cannot be grasped. It fades away and is forgotten, but it remains entrenched in our memories."

"That is not enough for me."

"I can give you more. Better Besun. Besun that is worth far more than anything your compatriots have found."

The Fantan's limbs fell slackly to the ground; thin flaps of skin slid in front of two of its body openings. "Oh, yes? How will you undertake that?"

"I would say that I am a specialist in that area." Adams decided to stay as close to the truth as possible. "I have observed your people. I have considered the matter. I think I can give you what you seek."

"Then do it!"

"Which brings us back to the beginning of our conversation. I demand compensation for my services."

"A wheeler-dealer." The Fantan looked thoughtful. "It's not the first time that we have met someone like you. An opportunist who doesn't care about his people and is ready to betray them if he gains a profit from it."

"I don't want to hurt anybody, Fantan or human."

“That’s what they all say.”

“What do you have to lose? You far outstrip us. There is nothing I could do to put you in danger.”

“Danger.” The Fantan seemed to turn this word over in his mind as if he couldn’t even comprehend it. Finally he asked, “What do you expect in return for more Besun?”

“Knowledge. About your people. Your culture. Your technology. Your pearls of wisdom.”

“You demand no monetary payment? No wealth, no power?”

“No.”

“That is unusual.”

The Fantan abruptly laid down on the floor and rolled its body across the wooden stage, emitting a groaning sound every time the protruding skin flaps touched the floor.

Was he considering it? Was he annoyed? What had caused him to behave so strangely?

You’re still drawing parallels to human behavior, Homer! Nothing he does should surprise you. Watch and learn. Form a judgment only when you think you know the Fantan well enough.

The alien got back up onto its “legs.” He glided over to Adams and asked, “What is your being designation?”

“I am called Homer,” Adams replied.

“And the meaning of this designation?”

“In the original meaning from an old Earth language that has fallen out of use, *homeros* means ‘hostage’ or ‘pledge.’”

Unexpectedly, Stemp’s voice was there in his head again. A scene occurring somewhere in the backstreets of an English town. The two of them, tottering, clinging together. Drunk. An old man and

one who also couldn't exactly consider himself young anymore.

Stemp told a lowbrow stage joke far too loudly. Windows opened, and the wretchedness of the modern English language was poured over them in the form of the customary four-letter words.

Stemp laughed and stretched his arms high in the air as if demanding that the fine, upstanding people whose sleep he was stealing should swear at him more and louder.

At some point, he cut off his performance—for even then had been playing a role. He approached Adams, grabbed him by the lapels, and dragged him along into the complete darkness of a courtyard littered with used condoms, needles, and the ugly traces of human waste. It stank deplorably. Stemp pulled him closer as if about to kiss him. His eyes gleamed.

"You bear a very special name, Gershwin. One that I pronounce only reluctantly. By giving it to you, your parents conferred upon you a very special responsibility, and an extraordinary burden." He was whispering now. "I feel what lies within you. The genius. The heritage of an old, blind Greek who became the greatest storyteller in human history." The actor coughed, straining. "My apotheosis is already far behind me, Gershwin. I am loved and deified. Women young and old throw their underwear onto the stage and shriek as soon as they catch sight of me. They have always seen the star in me and never the human." He gave his friend a sad smile, one that might not have even been affected. "So I gave them the star and forgot about the human. He hardly even exists in me anymore. I'm the likeness, the reflection of what people expect of me." He tapped Adams's chest with his index finger. "Your namesake suffered the same fate. He became a myth, the bringer of all beauty in the poetic arts. Homer was reduced to the artist...and nowadays, we don't even know if he really lived or if the great Greek myths were ascribed to a single fictional figure for simplicity's sake." Stemp bent down and let his head sink against Adams's chest as if he wanted to take a nap then and there. "So it may go for you one day too. Yearn for that day—and curse it."

Every word had remained etched in Adams's memory; every damned thought. Even the sour stench of alcohol from Stemp's

mouth rose into his nose again now as he remembered it.

“Well?” the Fantan asked impatiently.

“The name Homer denotes me as a storyteller. Someone who juggles with words and language.”

The Fantan embraced his own body with two limbs. After a while he said, “I am Sheperk. I am the single-colored being of space music whose thirst for knowledge is large. The name was bestowed upon me by my great-grandparent, and it has a good ring to it.”

“Yes, that it does,” Adams affirmed without knowing what the Fantan was trying to say to him. Was it a sign of trust that Sheperk had told him his name?

“I want you to furnish me with Besun. As much as possible. For I am Sheperk. And I will remunerate you if I am of the opinion that your service warrants it.”

“That sounds fair.”

“It *is* fair. And now let us begin. My time is limited.”

“Very well.” Adams waved at Julian and the other two young people. They had played their part; he didn’t need them anymore.

All three looked disappointed. They had expected that he would include them in his plans. But he wouldn’t. It was enough to put his own life on the line.

“We will need your vehicle to get from one place to the next as quickly as possible.”

“Naturally. You are welcome on board.”

Adams activated his pod, a vital tool for the next few hours or even days, and followed the Fantan, who was heading purposefully towards the flounder.

“See you soon!” said Adams with a jolly wave to his co-conspirators. He even managed a smile. In reality, his heart fell into

his stomach as he walked towards the strange-looking aircraft.

4.

Perry Rhodan

Ferrol

"You disobeyed my order back on the *Good Hope*, Ras," said Rhodan.

"I did what I thought was right." The Sudanese man presented a calm demeanor, but Rhodan knew him well enough by now to know that he was afraid of this overdue conversation.

Chaktor was leading their small party through knee-deep swamp water with a thick undergrowth of bamboo. Alexander Baturin and Wuriu Sengu were scuttling after the Ferron, while Rhodan and Tschubai had fallen back a little.

"I know. But I still feel betrayed by you." How could he get it through to Tschubai when he could hardly put it into words himself? "You've become a powerful asset to me over the past free days. People respect you, pay you heed. The other mutants go to *you* for advice."

The teleporter mumbled something that sounded like "That's not true."

"No need for modesty, Ras. I see what's inside you!" Rhodan struggled for words. "Right now, we're trying to turn millennia of human history upside down. Terrania is the vision of a city where we exemplify how the members of diverse cultures can interact with each other. We might find answers to our questions here on Ferrol and on countless other worlds."

"I can't say I think much of what I've seen and experienced on our journey so far," Tschubai answered. He slashed at a bamboo stick that stood in his way. "The problems here are the same ones we're struggling with on Earth. Greed for power, grandstanding, aggression, war. That all sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it? I don't

think we'll find what we're looking for on Ferrol. Or on any other planet. We should have stayed at home and dealt with our own problems."

"That's narrow-minded thinking."

Rhodan stumbled and almost fell from the path. A few meters away, a small Bollog bubbled and gurgled. Quick as a flash, the transporter grabbed his upper arm and held on tightly before the former astronaut ended up in deeper swamp water. Rhodan thanked him with a nod and continued.

"We have to expand our horizons, and fast. We need to know what's going on out in the vast expanse of space that we saw as no more than a black cloth with pinpricks of light for so long. Is it like you say? A place where the same difficulties await, only a thousand times bigger? Do people exist who follow other paths? What can we learn? Who can we learn from?"

"Survival of the fittest. That looks to me to be an ironclad rule that can't be shaken even on Ferrol."

"You're judging prematurely."

"I have eyes. I see what's happening. How the Topsidans nip all Ferron resistance in the bud."

"But so far we've learned practically nothing about the locals' defensive tactics."

The environment gradually changed, with ever more dry islands appearing. To the right, the terrain rose up gently.

"I don't think the Ferrons are confronting this invasion completely unprepared. I'm sure they have plans for how to defend against usurpers."

"Which you'd like to know about."

"Absolutely. We could face a similar crisis of our own soon. We need answers to our questions. Aside from that, I want to help the Ferrons."

“Don’t you think that’s a little arrogant, Perry? The *Good Hope* gave us a certain advantage in space combat against the Topsidans, but the ship was destroyed. We’re just humans on our first venture into the great unknown. How are we supposed to help the natives?”

Rhodan struggled for words. He didn’t know. He wanted to learn, he wanted to gain experience...and he wanted to help.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand,” he said, evading the question. “We’re in a totally alien environment and we have to be able to depend on each other. On the *Good Hope*, I gave you an order to get Thora to safety. Not because I wanted to look selfless, but because I *know* the group’s chances of survival would have been far better with the Arkonide here.”

“I doubt that.”

“One last time, Ras: accept my decisions. Don’t cast doubt on them again.”

“It was about *you*, Perry! About preventing the most important person on Earth right now from dying. There’s no denying Thora has skills and knowledge that could have helped us. But I would make the same decision again without hesitation. Always.”

Rhodan fell silent. He watched as the Sudanese man walked ahead and rejoined the other two mutants.

Was that really true? In the space of a few weeks, had Rhodan himself become so significant? Had he already been put on a pedestal like a statue?

No. Tschubai was wrong. He just hadn’t embraced what it was *really* about yet.

They took a break, one of the many that had become necessary at frequent intervals. They rested in a small clearing that offered a toppled tree trunk as a place to sit, moss-covered and shimmering blue and green.

Rhodan’s thighs burned. Even though they were largely past the

swampland now, every step was torture, especially as their route led gently but steadily uphill.

"How much farther to Thorta?" he asked Chaktor, not for the first time that day.

"Nearly forty kilometers," the translation device conveyed. "We have the toughest part of our journey behind us. We're now in the heartland of the Warani, the Swamp Ferrons. They settle here in the wetlands, and when rainfall is lower and curious people and tourists swarm here, they draw back deeper into the swamps."

"They like to keep to themselves?"

"They want as little to do with the Ferrons as possible. Even though they..."

The translator dropped out as Chaktor gave explanations of the discrepancies between the individual population groups. It seemed to relate to religiously motivated differences of opinion, different outlooks on life, but also on values that had no equivalent on Earth.

"Why haven't we encountered a single Warani yet?" Rhodan asked. "They must have noticed what's going on here."

"Oh, they have." Chaktor turned around in a full circle. "They just haven't deemed it necessary to make contact with us so far. But I'm certain they're following us."

"Oh yeah?" Rhodan drew his head in. He felt watched all of a sudden.

"*Darvo,*" someone said. "That's true. The Pomanz is smarter than he looks."

A layer of moss opened up right in front of them. A short Ferron pushed under it and came forward. Shaking off plants and earth, he positioned himself in front of Rhodan in a confident pose.

"You bring death and destruction," he said. "And you must answer for that."

Suddenly, there were more Swamp Ferrons. They stepped out from between trees, crawled out of hollows and holes in the ground. One who had been lying in a nearby creek bed was frozen stiff. But he didn't complain. He just looked at them with a furious gaze.

The Ferron who had revealed himself first took a step back. He produced a jagged knife and used it to draw a line in front of him.

"He wants to talk," Chaktor whispered to Rhodan. "That's good. And he wants us to stay at least three steps away from him. That's bad."

Rhodan stepped forward, reaching the minimum distance permitted. "My name is Perry Rhodan. I come from Earth."

"I don't care about your name. Nor do I care about what brought you and your companions here. What matters is that you have caused damage to the native waters. Damage that will take years to be remedied."

"Our ship was shot down by enemies and crash landed. We—"

The Swamp Ferron made a small jump to the side and made a spitting sound. The knife in his hand sliced through the air. "You start with the excuses as soon as you open your mouth! Your airship is geared towards battle, no? You bring destruction with you, death and corruption! Do you mean to deny that?"

"No." Rhodan thought feverishly. "But our intention was and is to support the Ferrons in the fight against their enemies."

"To fight fire with fire!" The man spat a stream of liquid in front of Rhodan's legs. "You bring death to achieve peace. Is that what you are getting at, stranger? Do you even realize the absurdity of your words?"

Chaktor stepped up next to him. "I beg you, Warani—"

"You would do well to hold your tongue, Pomanz!" the Swamp Ferron barked at him.

Rhodan felt the tiredness in his limbs. A headache reached all

the way to his fully tensed neck. He had stretched himself too thin. He had held far too many fruitless discussions lately. With power hungry people on Earth who wanted to misuse the Arkonides for their own ends. And on the other side, with endless dreaming idealists with no sense of pragmatism. If not for his vision of a united mankind living in peace, he'd have long since collapsed under the weight of responsibility or been ground to dust between the two extremes.

"Have you never had to defend the swamp against robbers, Warani? Have you never fought for your life—and killed—to keep yourself alive?"

"You purport to have traveled here in your spacecraft purely to save your own skin?"

"We received a distress call."

"He's telling the truth," Chaktor added, quietly and at a pitch that Rhodan found particularly emphatic. "You Warani cannot be so detached from everything that you're not aware of the lizard beings' plans. They invaded our solar system and destroyed the majority of our fleet. Thousands of Ferrons died trying to protect this planet and others from the invaders."

"We know about that." The Warani interlaced the fingers of both hands and splayed them out.

"I'm a survivor of a Topsidan attack. These beings here who call themselves humans risked their lives to save mine. To rescue me and keep the lizards from attacking Ferrol and other worlds."

"Violence, always more violence..."

"Perry Rhodan is my *Dosthea*. The one who saved my life." Chaktor stepped forward—farther than allowed by his own guidelines. He stopped a meter from the Warani. "You know what that means. I can and will not tolerate you insulting my *Dosthea* or holding him accountable for actions he took in good faith."

"You know our customs and traditions, Pomanz?" The Warani

appeared thoughtful all of a sudden.

"I have family in the Flowing Woods. Grandmother Bahamtar taught me what it means to live here."

"The name Bahamtar is familiar to me. It has a good ring to it. The children of that old woman are honorable, one and all—at least those I know of so far. They respect life as it should be respected."

The discussion had shifted into an arena that Rhodan couldn't follow any longer. It was about ethos, family ties, dignity, and highly complicated behavioral rules. Chaktor and the other man drew closer, centimeter by centimeter, moved apart from each other, made frenzied hand gestures, then stood calmly. The game was fascinating and terrifying at the same time. Rhodan did his best to stay calm even as the other Warani edged closer and slowly surrounded the humans.

The simplicity of the local customs confused Rhodan. The Ferrons had conquered space and explored the Vega system. Several of the planets and moons had been settled by them, according to the *Good Hope*'s instruments. Despite this, the Warani presented themselves as halfway savage.

Don't be prejudiced! Rhodan admonished himself. *They cultivated a different perspective on life, that's all.*

The two Ferrons' conversation came to an end. They raised both arms and turned the palms towards one another without touching them. Then they both stepped back without letting the other out of their sight until the Warani stepped between the trees at the edge of the clearing...and disappeared from one moment to the next, his companions also drawing back in uncanny silence.

"What now?" Rhodan asked.

"They'll continue to watch us," Chaktor replied with an expressionless face. "Just don't let them see any emotion."

"Understood."

"I reached an *Arcive*. Roughly translated, that's a partial

understanding for our situation. Everything the Warani can't classify as black and white or good and evil receives this designation."

"What does it mean for us?"

"That we can keep going. *Must* keep going, rather. They won't put a single stone in our way, but they also won't help us reach our goal, the city of Thorta, any quicker."

"Could be worse."

"The bad news is, we can't take any more breaks. No catching our breath from now on."

Alexander Baturin stifled a groan. Rhodan threw him an admonishing glance. *Don't show any emotions! Don't try the patience of the Warani, who see the swampland as their home!*

Out loud, he asked, "So is there any good news?"

"That depends on how you see it, Perry Rhodan. The Warani I spoke to will accompany us to Thorta. He wishes to speak with the Thort about the consequences of the Topsidian invasion." Quietly, Chaktor added, "In his extremely pronounced sense of self-importance, he believes that our head of government has nothing better to do than give him an audience. I smell more trouble for us ahead..."

Step by step. Breath by breath. Everything hurt. The tiniest cuts and scars they'd incurred burned and grew inflamed. Wuriu Sengu developed a fever. His forehead was blazing hot, and he kept babbling to himself, this man who was otherwise so taciturn.

"Not much farther now!" Chaktor repeated like a mantra. "Just a few more kilometers."

Night had fallen a while back. Unsettling sounds filled the woods around them. The bushes rustled everywhere. Birds active at night loudly screeched into the darkness, voicing their anger at the unfamiliar invaders in their territory. The trees were densely

packed again, with two moons and the stars visible between them. A night sky completely unknown to Rhodan.

One of those stars might be our sun.

His nose sniffled; his jaw and teeth ached. Bacteria had probably made themselves at home in his sensitive gums, from where they could spread through his entire bloodstream.

Wuriu staggered. Rhodan moved alongside him and reached out to support him, but the Japanese man's legs gave out. Without Chaktor's support, Rhodan would never have managed to prevent his companion from crashing to the ground.

"He has to stay awake!" the Ferron insisted. "Otherwise it means a death sentence for us all. The Warani's threat was unambiguous in that regard. They will allow no signs of weakness."

"Understood."

Rhodan waved Ras Tschubai over to him. The tall Sudanese man was the strongest of them. He had recovered from the demanding teleports and was helping wherever he could. Now, he too grabbed hold of Wuriu and pushed him forward.

Alexander Baturin stayed silent, as he often had over the last few hours. He trudged behind, never looking left or right. Was he brooding over something? Even if he had proven himself loyal since the founding of Terrania, he still didn't have that special kind of enthusiasm that Rhodan valued so much in his closest comrades. The cosmonaut had been dragged into a maelstrom of events against his will, starting with the discovery of the Arkonide ship called the *Aetron* on the Moon.

"Keep moving!" Chaktor demanded.

He led them along a stream edged by wondrous, faintly phosphorescent mushrooms, easing their progress. The trees around them gave way to undergrowth, and the undergrowth was replaced by clusters of bushes. The terrain rose upward more sharply now. Brooks meandered towards them, hardly visible under the full grass.

More than once, Rhodan misstepped and landed in cold water. His legs were numb by now; his teeth chattered intensely. He was frozen to the bone. He followed Chaktor, who avoided every rivulet with inimitable skill and confidence. Behind him came Tschubai, supporting Wuriu. Baturin brought up the rear of their small party.

The crest of the hill wasn't far away now. Stone relics that looked like obelisks propped up against each other soared into the air. Next to them were a few buildings that had obviously originated in modern times.

"The border," said Chaktor. "The Warani's sphere of influence ends here."

"So we did it?"

"As soon as we reach the top of the hill."

Rhodan's heart beat faster. He was so impossibly tired, yet all of a sudden he felt elated and full of verve. The sight of the hill gave him a second wind. They'd successfully achieved their first intermediate goal.

Then a burst of flame flew past them in the sky. It was followed by a crash of thunder. The tip of the hill was bathed in red and yellow light. The earth began to shake and didn't stop.

The Topsidans had broken through the Ferrons' resistance in space. Now they had brought the war down to the planet.

The buildings turned out to be simple huts with sleeping compartments, showers, and stoves. The well-equipped first aid unit would have prompted jealousy even from practicing doctors on Earth. Alongside a wide variety of medicines, it included a diagnostic device that allowed even a layman to perform highly detailed analyses and treat sprains and even broken bones. Foam that hardened within a few minutes could be applied according to the highly intelligent device's instructions to force the affected limbs into a recovery position directly after diagnosis. Medical tape that seeped into the skin replaced clips or stitches. Two external

pacemakers were stored there too; the connecting tubes merely had to be stuck into the crook of the patient's arm. The rest of the analysis work and stabilization measures were be handled by the equipment on its own.

"Quite a discrepancy," Tschubai said. "After plodding through a godforsaken jungle, we've suddenly stumbled across a civilization far more advanced than ours."

"Looks can be deceiving, Ras." Rhodan ran a hand over the cooking unit's heating plate. There was a hissing sound as warmth rose up. He put some water on top, and it quickly began to boil. "We're only two, maybe three decades behind. We might even be ahead of them in some respects." He gestured towards a device that looked like an old-fashioned plasma television. It didn't work. They were still cut off from any flow of information.

Chaktor, who had been unshakably calm so far, sat stock still in a corner, as far as possible from the windows that offered a view of the land north of the hill. He looked shocked. Flashes of light blazed on the horizon. Missiles were falling on settled land. The invaders were destroying industrial facilities, streets, bridges, trade centers, public buildings, private housing complexes. They drew no line between military and civilian targets.

The Ferron pulled a glimmering silvery ball from the breast pocket of his tattered uniform. Exceptionally realistic images of his three wives and a large number of his children appeared above it. Their faces held an exuberant joy that seemed completely at odds with these dreadful hours and days.

"They can't do this," Chaktor whispered again and again, his gaze focused on his loved ones, his voice drowned out here and there by peals of thunder that sometimes came from far away, but sometimes from very close by. "They can't do this."

Wuriu was beside him. The Japanese man had recovered relatively well. He didn't say a word, but the mutant's presence seemed to help the alien a little.

Baturin walked over to Rhodan. "We should get out of here as

soon as possible!" he said. "This building isn't safe."

"None of the Topsidian missiles or bombs has hit a target closer than five kilometers from here. In my estimation, we're safe here for now." Rhodan drew a heavy breath. "Would you rather be lying in the underbrush somewhere in your wet and clammy clothes, surrounded by a plant and animal kingdom that we know next to nothing about?"

"We should keep moving."

"And go where, exactly? To the area under attack?"

"Yes. No." Baturin pounded a hand on the stove, where the hissing was getting louder. "We shouldn't be here at all," he whispered. "Flying to the Vega system was a huge mistake. *Your* mistake, Perry."

"I helped to—"

"And you see where your helpfulness has gotten us, American?!"

Rhodan wanted to say something back, but he let it lie and reached out a hand to lay it placatingly on Baturin's shoulder.

The Russian dodged it, backing up a step. "Don't touch me!" he screamed without warning. "Just leave me alone!"

"I only wanted to—"

"Yeah, I know, you always '*only want to*,'" Baturin imitated. "And in the process you drag us from one misery to the next. Ever since you decided to use Thora and Crest for your own ends, everything has gone wrong!"

He stomped away in a hurry, going over to one of the sleeping cabins, where he tore the door open, threw it closed again behind him, and locked it. Suppressed sobbing came out of the tiny sleeping unit. The man was at the very end of his nerves.

Was he right, in a way? Should Rhodan have taken another path? Used violence to fight the wrangling for power and influence

that threatened to destroy Earth? Used weaponry from Arkonide stocks?

No. He had handled it correctly. For good reason, he had not trusted the Chinese, the Europeans, the Russians, or his own countrymen.

He drew from an inexplicable self-confidence and a power whose source he still hadn't properly investigated yet. Rhodan believed in himself and in the idea of an Earth with no place for class arrogance or racial characteristics as reasons to look down on one another. People would find their place and their fulfillment in a much, much larger community.

Was all this pathos appropriate given their situation? Doubt overcame him again, and again he swept it aside. He had to look forward. To focus. Identify new, achievable goals and head towards them as purposefully as possible.

Everything's going to be fine, he told himself, and smiled. Rhodan thought of his mother. How she had put plasters on cuts and blown on them three times, finally using the same words that had just gone through his head. *Everything's going to be fine.*

The water boiled. Rhodan left it bubbling for a while, then let the pot cool down. Chaktor had given him antibacterial tablets from the first aid area. He took them and washed them down with enough liquid, then provided his companions with the same. Even Baturin opened his partition to accept the medicine.

Their metabolisms had no doubt been infected on a microscopic level with local conquerors. It was entirely possible that tiny representatives of the local fauna were eating them from the inside —worms, germlings, spores they had inhaled. About ten hours had passed since they first set foot on Ferrol. So far, no signs of illness had presented themselves. Maybe they had been lucky.

Tschubai jumped up and ran over to the sanitary facilities. He only just managed to reach them before loudly throwing up.

All of a sudden, Rhodan had an awful stomachache.

He woke up with his head throbbing as if he had a bad hangover. The muscles of his upper abdomen were sore from the repeated vomiting. His stomach growled; breathing was even more of a struggle than the previous day.

Chaktor replaced the cloth on his forehead. Glaring light poured in through the windows, blinding him.

"I've diagnosed you as best I could," the Ferron said. "You're healthy. Your body's defensive responses will still occupy you for a while. But it seems you're getting accustomed to the conditions on Ferrol."

"I feel like...like..."

"Like you've overindulged on alcohol." Chaktor's mouth twisted. He showed a smile that on Earth would have looked disparaging, but was no doubt meant sincerely and cordially here. "The symptoms are similar to that of an *overhang*."

The translation wasn't right, but Rhodan knew exactly what was meant. He returned the smile and tried to get to his feet. "How are the others doing?"

"As well as you, Rhodan." Chaktor turned serious. "You all need some time to rest. Time that we don't have, unfortunately."

"I know." Rhodan carefully stood, holding on tightly to Chaktor. "We'll set off in an hour. I'm feeling much better, anyway," he said in a croak.

"Of course."

Rhodan drank cool water and took more tablets. Vega, the sun, was showing itself for the first time since their arrival on Ferrol. Still, he avoided looking outside. It was so bright, so large, so...so...*different*.

"It's quieted down," he said.

“The bombardment lessened about two hours ago and stopped entirely not long before you awoke.” Chaktor didn’t say anything more. He chewed listlessly on crumbly bread wrapped in several layers of dark green leaves.

“What happened to that Warani? I thought he was going to accompany us.”

“He got here before us yesterday. He slept outdoors, near the border marker.” Chaktor gestured vaguely in the direction of the obelisks propped against one other.

“Border marker?” Rhodan asked.

“It’s made from tuff stone that was hewn in ancient times. Supposedly it’s several thousand years old, and yet the level of craftsmanship is something we can barely match today.” The Ferron took a second loaf of bread out of a wrapper that disintegrated as soon as he ran his fingers along it. “The Warani see these as the legacy of their forebears. Relics of a time long past. They claim that they never cast shadows, and that the stones only grew due to the presence of technological accomplishments.”

“How did the Warani come to differ so much from other tribes?”

“The population structure is…inhomogeneous. A multitude of tribes exist on Ferrol. They differ based on skin color, way of life, political perspective. We’re shaped by the environment we live in.”

“That sounds all too familiar to me.”

“There’s a government that has authority over the tribes and struggles to do right by everybody. The Thort is a respected figure through and through, however. That office is as old as historical writings. With the Thort, social and economic booms rise and fall.”

“And if a Thort can’t get a grip on the tribes? If he’s too weak?”

“That problem has never occurred. No one opposes him.”

“How is it that the Warani live such a walled-off life and refuse all technological progress?”

“That’s how they want it.” Chaktor struggled for words. “Tribal affiliation can also come out of a particular worldview. Many Warani once had an average existence in the large cities—in Helakar, Hopther, or Thorta. At some point they left that life behind and went into the swamps, where they could cut their ties with modern civilization and forge a new existence.”

“And that works?”

“Whoever goes into the swamps leaves their old life behind. Worldly possessions, family, clothing, reputation. As soon as you step into the water, you are born again. And every crumb of respect from the other members of the Warani tribe must be hard won. Most social romantics and adventurers fail; the ones who want to break new ground manage it.”

“Can it go the other way?”

“The Warani give their members the freedom to leave at any time. Nothing will stand in their way, but they also won’t be given the slightest bit of help or support.” Chaktor considered. “The system has its flaws, but it works.”

There were groups like the Amish in the United States who had lived in similarly walled-off societies for centuries now. The Amish’s sense of community rested on their beliefs. On Ferrol too some people chose to say farewell to civilization of their own free will. Rhodan shrugged. It was only to be expected that there were different cultural developments here than on Earth.

Tschubai, Baturin, and Wuriu each got to their feet one after the other. They looked battered. The Japanese man had a light fever, and his face was caked in sweat. The stronger gravity would only tax them further. Today would probably be even worse than yesterday.

They unenthusiastically ate the bread Chaktor had baked for them. It tasted of nothing, but if the Ferron was to be believed, it was highly nutritious and would restore their spent energy.

Once they’d finished their meal, they packed up their few

belongings and some food and went outside. Rhodan gulped as he took in the scope of the destruction before them. Cloud banks cast long, wide shadows over a ruined land. Smoke trails rose into the air; fierce blazes burned in various places.

Topsidian scouters hovered close to the ground above large settlements dotted across the otherwise green landscape. The ships looked forbidding and intimidating. No one was fighting back against the invaders anywhere. Had they already taken over the entire planet? Had Ferrol fallen within a few hours? Did it even make sense to seek out the palace and the Thort anymore?

"Kamavitra and Lamia-Treé are occupied," Chaktor murmured. He held a hand against his forehead to guard against the unusual sunlight. "Both cities had well-trained infantry units stationed there."

"Meaning?"

"The Topsidans clearly knew our defensive structures very well by the time they started their bombardment. They must have taken prisoners and...and questioned them."

"Tortured, you mean."

Chaktor gave no response. As before, he stared in the direction of Thorta, the city with more than fifty million inhabitants, situated beyond the plain, surrounded by hills that prevented them from getting a direct view of it. What they saw before them was fertile swampland and, behind that, densely settled territory that formed Thorta's suburbs.

"We're setting out!" said Chaktor uncharacteristically loudly.

"It's about time," another voice said. "I thought you'd never get up out of your soft beds."

Rhodan jumped and spun around. The Warani who had spoken to them yesterday stood right behind him. He looked tense and anxious.

"Are you sure you want to accompany us?" Chaktor asked.

“Of course.”

“Then let’s go.” Chaktor gestured for the humans to follow him. He didn’t give the Warani another glance.

They locked the hut and went on their way, past the stone obelisks, which looked even more impressive in daylight than it had at night. From there, they went downhill, towards smoldering ruins…and a war zone.

“What’s your name?” Rhodan asked. He had fallen back and was now walking beside the Warani along a narrow, barely noticeable path leading down.

“Menet,” the Swamp Ferron replied monosyllabically. He held an oversized walking staff in his right hand and kept stabbing it into the ground as if searching for something.

“Why do you want to talk to the Thort?”

“There is a need.”

“Does this need relate to the Topsidans?”

“To the survival of the Warani. And to things that have nothing to do with you.”

Rhodan did not even think of letting Menet’s standoffish manner ruffle him. “This journey would be much easier for all of us if we knew we could depend on each other.”

“You mistrust me? You insult me?” The left hand of the short Swamp Ferron edged towards a hunting knife in his wide leather belt.

“I’m an alien here. I don’t know the customs or traditions of this world,” said Rhodan, undaunted. “Help me to trust you.”

“All evil stems from an overabundance of technology, combined with the desire for more and more power.” Menet spat light brown liquid into the dewy grass. “It’s beings like you that come from

space and kill us."

"As I told you, we have nothing to do with the Topsidans."

"But you're like them. You cannot restrain your curiosity. You're restless and always searching."

"You can't possibly hold *that* against us!"

"I can. Because I know what inner communion means. It's not necessary to travel to other places to seek salvation. To journey through the Black Void."

The Black Void... A mystically imbued synonym for space.

"We're all on the search for knowledge. And we wanted to help your fellow Ferrons when they were attacked."

"And? Did it change anything for the better?"

Rhodan fell silent. They were talking in circles. He couldn't combat Menet's arguments. They seemed so clear and decisive, yet they only encompassed a part of the truth. The reality was far more complex. Wasn't it?

"We have a long way to go still," the Swamp Ferron said, moving forward more briskly. "If we want to reach our goal before it's all too late, we should hurry."

"What do you mean, 'Before it's all too late'?"

"Before the Red Palace is captured and the Thort imprisoned by the Topsidans." Menet left him there and caught up to the other Ferron, whom he walked a few steps behind.

He is a pretty peculiar guy.

The plain was wet and strewn with waterways that were mostly of artificial origin. Here and there along the banks were boats that must have been left there years ago, slim and wide ships with a shallow draft that might have transported goods once.

Ignoring Chaktor's advice, Rhodan stepped onto one of the boats...and immediately put his foot through the rotten wood into the water. Menet sneered and laughed at his clumsiness while the Ferron spacefarer disinfected the deep, heavily bleeding scratches in his right leg and wrapped an elastic bandage around his lower leg.

"How far now to the next village?" Rhodan asked after thanking Chaktor for his assistance. They needed information. Someone who could tell them if Ferrol's government had already fallen, and the Thort with it.

"Two kilometers. We'll presumably have to cross three of the Wouffars, the waterways."

"Where are we supposed to do that?"

"The paths are signposted." The Ferron squinted. "If the markings are still accurate, the next one is a little ways downstream."

"I don't see any markings."

Chaktor pointed at a bundle of reeds. The individual stalks were crisscrossed at miscellaneous angles. Nothing indicated that they'd ever been touched by Ferron hands. "The signs are unambiguous," he claimed. "Three bound on the right side, three raised vertically in the middle, one notched to warn of the spawning ground of a type of river shark. We must be on our guard."

Rhodan let the matter rest. The reeds might have been the equivalent of pictograms on Earth.

They trudged on, surrounded by swarms of mosquitoes and sinking into the wet ground over and over. Vega was high in the sky now, radiating merciless heat. They all wore cloths tied around their heads, which they moistened at regular intervals.

There was a rustling sound in the tall grass. Menet slid in beside Rhodan. He switched his walking staff from his right hand to his left—and flung it away with full force in the direction of the tallest patch of grass.

A pitiful sound rang out. Something moved, hissed, snarled, tried to flee. But that something had been hit.

A light blue patch appeared, starting small but quickly growing. *Blood!* Rhodan thought. *But I can't see the victim.* The "walking staff" had disappeared into the tangle of grass.

"Stay back," said Menet. "I've only injured the Guicol. It might still get back on its feet."

"A Guicol?" Chaktor asked. He looked confused and frightened at the same time. "I thought there were hardly any left on the northern continent."

"There are still a handful." Menet bared his teeth. They were tinged yellow. "And I can assure you there are plenty in the swamp as well."

Rhodan strained his eyes to see the outline of the animal that was supposedly there. But there was nothing. Just grassland and an ever growing patch of blood.

Menet drew his knife. He stepped forward. His movements were met with ugly hissing sounds. He swept the knife across the nearly waist-high grasses, lightning-fast and with a strength he owed to the local gravity conditions.

Blades of grass fell to the ground, and the Guicol's hissing ceased abruptly. Menet put his weapon back into his belt and gingerly reached for his staff. He turned it around several times in all different directions before carefully pulling it back to himself, not letting his attention waver for a second. Only after a minute or so did he reach into the grass and pull out the dead animal.

The body was shaped like an oversized flatbread. The chinitous form shimmered in glaring colors and seemed to disappear as soon as Menet held it against the background of the grass. A dozen thin legs hung from it. They bore hefty-looking barbs on their underside that looked like spikes and gave the limbs the appearance of overlong plant stalks.

“Perfect mimicry,” said Ras Tschubai.

“A female,” said Menet. He tore the animal in two with a jerk. Countless white balls fell into a folding bowl the Swamp Ferron quickly produced from nowhere. “The females are stupid. They make noises while the men quietly wait for their prey. Mmm, delicious!” He stuffed a piece of the spawn into his mouth. “Would anyone else like a taste? It’s still warm.”

Rhodan quickly turned away and suppressed his urge to gag. It reassured him to see that Chaktor was also wrestling with the contents of his stomach.

A barely visible ford allowed them to cross the Wouffar. With instinctive certainty, Chaktor led them from one waterway to the next, while Menet showed more uncertainty the farther they got from his swampy habitat.

“Behind the next hill, we’ll likely bump into some locals,” said Chaktor. “I know the people there. Stubborn farmers. They don’t care much about what’s going on in the city.”

“Not the first time I’ve heard that said,” Rhodan said with a sideways glance at Menet.

“Watch yourself, red-face!” said the Swamp Ferron. He reached into his bag and put more spawn from the Guicol female into his mouth. “I’ve challenged people to a duel for less brazen insults than that!”

“It’s all right, Menet. I apologize. But I’d hoped it would be easier to make contact with the local authorities and the Thort. If we have to negotiate with every village chief and beg for help, I fear we’ll never reach the Red Palace in time.”

In time… Did that phrase even hold any weight anymore? Half an hour earlier, the ground had begun to shake again. The Topsidans were attacking to the west. Maybe Ferron combat units were deploying against the lizard beings; maybe the latter were bombing the last nests of resistance.

Chaktor didn't say anything. He was by no means sure of himself. The situation on this world had turned out to be far less uniform than Rhodan had imagined.

Is this what awaits on Earth too? Progressively minded parts of the population venture forth into the stars in search of new goals and frontiers, while others hide themselves away on Earth and want nothing to do with the events happening around them?

He would bring an enormous amount of knowledge back to Earth with him if he managed to leave Ferrol alive. It might make it easier to commit humanity to a single unified goal.

You hopeless optimist...

They crossed a ridge in the ground barely ten meters high. Behind it stood a few houses, tightly packed together. Well-maintained fields, their fruits in full bloom, stretched out from the village like the rays of a sun, growing ever broader as they expanded outward. A lone vehicle rattled across the field, busy with the harvest. It drew a dust cloud behind it. The ground here was far drier than the area they had just crossed.

"We've been spotted," said Menet, pointing at some Ferrons gathering together near the small settlement. He reached for his knife and examined the blade to see how sharp it was.

"Put that thing away!" Chaktor demanded.

"I'm a Warani. My weapon is my pride."

"Your pride is as good as useless here," Rhodan interjected. "What's it going to do against firearms?"

The villagers had climbed into two open-topped vehicles shaped like caterpillars. The light reflected off what looked like long-barreled weapons.

"Hunting weapons," said Chaktor, squinting. "Nothing special...but powerful enough to blast through us."

"I'll do the talking," Rhodan stated.

“Impossible!” Chaktor screwed up his nose. “You have no idea what makes these people tick.”

“Maybe.” Rhodan smiled. “But I think my friends and I might be able to impress them. Ras, Wuriu, I’ll need your help.”

5.

Tako Kakuta

Ferrol

The Ferron woman in the wheelchair was called Fajon. She was a passionate mountain climber and, with the help of her friends and assistive technology of a kind unseen on Earth, she mastered the most difficult walls.

Now she was looking Kakuta up and down with barely concealed respect in her eyes, bowing down as low as her wheelchair allowed, maintaining her meek pose.

Kakuta wanted to say that he was no bringer of light. That he had no idea what Fajon wanted from him. But he let it go. The situation could swing off-balance at any moment; he could find himself with a vibrating knife pressed against his neck again.

What should he say? What *could* he say? Nothing came to mind that was suitable for the situation.

“We must bring him to Thorta as quickly as possible,” said one of the men. The one who had threatened him.

“To do what?” Fajon asked. “To pass him around, make his presence known, and so make the Topsidans aware of him as well? No, Bijoiu. We should first consider what would be best for us and for the Lightbringer.”

“You can safely leave that decision to me,” Kakuta said, trying to sound as persuasive as possible. He could only hope the Ferrons interpreted the tone of his voice correctly. “First I’d like you to bring my companions to safety.”

“You do not come alone! Just as it was foretold to us...”

“Can we please talk about prophecies another time?” Kakuta turned and looked in the direction where the others waited. “One of

my friends is badly injured. He urgently needs help."

How would the Ferrons take this request? Did they see him as an invulnerable, god-like being, and were they now starting to doubt who he was after all?

"Of course," said Fajon without hesitation. "Where are your companions?"

Kakuta had recovered enough strength to make a teleport with one other person. In Conrad Deringhouse's battle for survival, every second might count. On the other hand, he didn't want to blow his one advantage right away.

"They're camped there, below that outcrop about three kilometers away. We have to hurry," Kakuta insisted again.

Fajon turned to Bijoiu. "Bring up the copter and follow me."

"But the safety of—"

"The prior assumptions no longer apply. Do it!"

With a gesture that expressed humility and "please" in equal measure, she indicated for Kakuta to step closer.

He obeyed. Fajon ran her fingers over two gear sticks attached to the end of the right backrest. A motor hummed into action—and what had looked like a wheelchair changed again. The wheels inflated to the size of balloon tires. Footboards unfolded from the back side of the vehicle. Fajon asked him to stand there and hold on tight to the metal frame with the aid of several carabiners.

"Under no circumstances can you let go, Lightbringer." The Ferron's seat puffed up, wide airbags now protecting her on each side. Fajon pulled straps around her giant body as well.

"What are you planning?"

"I've always wanted to try this out." She grinned adventurously and ran her fingers through her curly red hair. "Here goes!"

With another flick of the wrist, the chair started moving. It started along the crest of the mountain, away from the other Ferrons, who barely paid her any further mind. They had placed a roughly shoe-sized device on the ground between them and were now giving that all their attention.

Kakuta's hands vibrated. Fajon sped up to breakneck speed. With confidence and bravado she circled around rocks, descended steep slopes, and picked routes hardly even wide enough to take the chair. More than once, one of the balloon tires fell over the edge of a precipice, threatening to send them plummeting into the depths.

He held his breath, ready to teleport them both to safety at any moment. But the woman didn't let herself be unnerved. She locked the tires on one side, accelerated and braked at the right moment, and took advantage of the natural features of the slope, which had a gradient of at least twenty degrees.

Kakuta was shaken up like he never had been in his life. He could hardly maintain his grip. He bit his tongue; the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. His teeth chattered loudly. His throat and neck muscles were strained to an unbearable degree.

All the while, Fajon kept her calm. With a level of self-control and mastery of her body that Kakuta would never have thought possible, she steered the chair downward in a wide arc past his companions' camp, and then locked her tires to perform a daring turn just a few meters from one of the many deep chasms. Then, with pinpoint accuracy, she made for the outcrop he had pointed to.

Fajon *laughed!* She was an adrenaline junkie. Someone who was permanently testing her physical boundaries, letting caution fall by the wayside. Right?

She stopped the wheelchair with a jerk. The carabiners snapped back, and Kakuta was free. He stumbled backwards. He felt dizzy, barely aware of his surroundings.

"Difficulty rating Curr, perhaps Bashid," said Fajon, shaking out her hair. "Not suited to everyone."

“That was... That was...”

“Awesome, wasn’t it?” Then, suddenly horrified, she wiped the smile off her face and replaced it with that same look of deference and respect. In her elation, she had totally forgotten that she had brought a “Lightbringer” with her.

Kakuta turned around. There he saw Darya Morozova. She had hidden behind some rocks, but now that she saw him, she walked over with no sign of worry about the Ferron’s presence. The situation was serious, then. More serious than before.

“How’s Conrad doing?” he asked, trying hard to look as calm as possible. He had taken on the role of leader of this small group, and he would have to keep to that role, come what may.

“Like shit. He’s getting weaker by the minute.” The cosmonaut gestured in Fajon’s direction with a lack of respect. “Can she help us? Where the hell did you find her? And why in God’s name did you come sledding down the mountain like that? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And I’ve never experienced anything like it. But we’ll come back to that.” He switched off the translator. “We have to let her and the other Ferrons see to Conrad. Otherwise...”

“Are there more of them nearby?” She slapped her forehead. “Of course, they would have to be! Otherwise that woman would never manage getting here.”

“Don’t be too sure. And yes, Fajon’s companions are waiting at the summit on their ‘copter.’ If the translation is correct, that must be an aircraft that takes off vertically.”

Fajon said something. Kakuta turned to her, activated the translator, and asked her to repeat herself.

“Where is the wounded man?” the woman asked. She had let the air out of her tires and put away and adjusted the angle of her seat. With a soft grinding sound, the vehicle came closer to him.

“I’ll take her to him,” said Morozova. “But I can’t imagine how

she can help him."

Fajon blinked several times. Again, she seemed to fluctuate between obsequiousness and another emotion, this time anger at Morozova's doubt. "I've been extensively trained to survive alone in the wilderness and deal with medical emergencies. I'm prepared to even amputate my own arm in the most extreme case. Otherwise I'd never have been granted a climbing permit for Poaffait's Cores."

Morozova gave Kakuta a subtle nod. She'd already gained some trust in the Ferron. Kakuta breathed a sigh of relief. Women's intuition was the best gauge they had available.

"Conrad is lying back there. He's lost a lot of blood."

The Russian led the way, Fajon rolling behind her, with Kakuta bringing up the rear. He was still feeling sick after the hellish ride the Ferron had just subjected him to, but that wasn't his priority. All that mattered was Conrad's survival.

Strange noises sounded from tightly packed wall fissures broken multiple times. The copter was fast approaching. The Ferrons had worked faster than expected.

Fajon uncovered Conrad's throat and examined the festering wound, its blackened edges, the blistering skin, and the discharge of pus. Suddenly she had a knife in her hand, and before Kakuta could react, she had made a long, deep cut. Reddish yellow liquid sloshed out of the wide open flesh. Kakuta thought he could even see the white of a bone. He hoped he was wrong.

"There is hope," Fajon said after a while. "I'm surprised at the almost one hundred percent anatomical match between us. I can stabilize the man, but with the means I have, I see no way of preventing the ongoing blood poisoning or the emergence of further inflammation sites." She faltered. "I'll do my best."

"We know, Fajon," Kakuta answered.

Deringhouse stared upward, his eyes vacant. Was he aware of what they were saying and what this alien woman was doing to

him? Did he feel pain or was already past that point?

Fajon poured water into the deep wound, washed it out, cut away strips of dead skin and threw them aside. A stench wafted up and was blessedly carried away again by the rising wind.

“He’s my friend,” stammered Rod Nyssen, who held his fellow astronaut’s head in his lap.

“I will do this.”

Fajon continued with her work. She moved like an army surgeon on the front line. Her one and only concern was her patient’s survival. She would amputate the leg, no ifs or buts, without asking Deringhouse’s friends for permission. She kept talking, no doubt more for herself than with observers in mind.

“If only there wasn’t this inflammation. Why does he react so strongly? The necrosis around the wound is alarming, but it’s not the real problem. And the blood loss? His skin is far too pale compared to the other Lightbringers. When is Bijoiu going to land the copter already...”

As if she had summoned it, a black shadow appeared over her. Kakuta looked up. Close above the outcrop, the impressive Ferron vehicle hung in the air. Four booms each held a set of one larger rotor blade and one smaller. They were rotating at high speed in opposite directions.

In the center sat the—transparent—control sphere. Four Ferrons were hunkered inside. One was busy steering the copter while the others were dealing with a rope winch that they were using to slowly lower a carrying frame.

The Ferron whom Kakuta recognized as Bijoiu swung onto the rope and slid down, jumping to the ground from a height of about three meters. He rolled past them, taking a few seconds to absorb his body’s momentum. Directly before a crevice, he got to his feet and regained his balance. He breathed calmly. Nothing suggested that this acrobatic stunt had strained him at all.

“Well?” he asked Fajon.

“We need to get to a healing house. Right now.”

The two Ferrons exchanged timid glances. Their uncertainty was palpable. “You know that’s not possible.”

“We’ll manage it! Masterbreaker Hom-aut’s healing house isn’t threatened by the conflict yet.”

“*Wasn’t* threatened before we made our way here!” Bijoiu countered, then waved his arms in a resigned gesture. “But what can I do? Once you get an idea in your head, nothing’s going to change your mind.”

“Right?” Fajon bared her white teeth, a strange contrast to her full, pale blue lips. Using the strength of her arms, she lifted herself out of the chair, bent forward, and kissed the man on the cheek.

Wind swept through the camp. It carried sleet with it.

“Let’s make sure we get out of here,” said Fajon. “Transport the patient up. Do it!”

6.

Homer G. Adams

Earth

The flounder barely had enough space. In contrast to others of its type, this vehicle had a roof. Sheperk slid his limbs and body into metal receptacles and lay there as if in a tin made to match his size. From there, he appeared to steer the ship with only the slightest motions.

Adams had to force himself into what might have been a cargo hatch. It was filled with the most impossible things. He saw a statue of the Virgin Mary, her wooden halo draped with Christmas decorations. A cube shape that could likely be ascribed to the neo agitprop artist Varayn was adorned with brass shoehorns of a type not commonly used since the 1960s. On a mass-produced Navajo blanket lay a spread of dried pears. A 3D copier steadily spat out tiny toy barbarians, while a threatening buzz droned from a shoebox that sounded like a swarm of hornets.

Adams pulled in his legs and squeezed into the space with his head turned to face Sheperk. He was extra careful not to touch anything. Who could tell how the Fantan would react?

“What’s our first destination?” the alien asked.

“We’ll fly to the mountain of mountains.” Adams pulled a map out of his breast pocket and pushed it forward so that it lay on Sheperk’s chest. The eight-thousander was marked on it. He was hoping the Fantan could actually read the map and use it for his purposes.

“A mountain range,” said Sheperk. “How boring.”

“This one is special. Wait until you’ve seen it.”

The flounder shook a little, and a humming sound began. Lights

came on, bathing the Fantan in red, green, yellow, and blue. Adams looked away, irritated. He felt sick; his ears hurt all of a sudden. The metal floor felt cold.

"Can I see where we're flying?" he asked.

"What for? Only the destination is relevant."

"We humans perceive it differently. The journey is a little Besun for us too."

"Interesting."

A flap opened in the wall in front of Adams, and a thin film fell out. Hanging by two threads, it dangled back and forth restlessly. Only after a few seconds did images appear on the film. They were too blurry for Adams to make any sense of, though.

Landscapes rushed past him so quickly that Adams had no chance to get his bearings. He thought he could see the barren desert, jagged rock piles, a dark blue lake, agricultural land. A city, then another, then damp vegetation. Rivers with steam clouds above them. Hills, mountains, mountain ranges. Snow and ice.

He shut his eyes. They were watering. He couldn't take it any longer. Were the Fantan's optic nerves geared towards taking in such rapidly changing images or was Sheperk playing a mean-spirited joke on him?

"We are now in the Karakoram range," the alien informed him.

"Excellent." Adams rubbed his eyes. "Stay to the south. Approach the southeastern summit ridge. Stay at a height of around seven thousand meters."

The images were clearer and easier to make out now. They showed the imposing, craggy K2, the behemoth that bore the honor of being the toughest mountain in the world to climb. The glaciers looked enormous yet were now only a fraction of their former size. The terrible consequences of climate change were particularly visible here.

Adams pointed out one of the steeply towering mountain's many ridges.

"Show me the flight path," said the Fantan. "Draw it on the screen in front of you. The course will be transferred to my databanks. Then I can follow it."

Adams did as requested. With the nail of one finger, he scratched on the thin material, drawing a circle at the intended end point of their first venture. "There," he said. "That's where you'll find your Besun. In a few minutes."

Time passed. Sheperk flew at a markedly reduced speed now. Was he impressed after all by the huge massifs, the ice, the scale, and the loneliness of the landscape?

They reached their destination. At a height of around seven thousand meters, they hovered close to K2, the mountain of mountains, on whose flanks more people had lost their lives than any other peak except Mount Everest.

K2 lived up to its reputation as the most challenging of all eight-thousanders even more now that the ice that had once seemed so eternal had given way to bare flanks of fragile stone. The Filippi and Godwin-Austen glaciers no longer met; Concordia Place, once the gathering point for all who wanted to climb up from the Chinese side, was bordered by gray rock.

But up here, in the seven-thousander region, where humans could only survive for a brief time before suffering physical and mental damage, everything still looked the way it always had. With the exception of the *Field of Fools* at a height of around 6,600 meters.

Starting in 2024, dozens of corpses had appeared there out of the thawing snow. People whose daring had led to calamity. Over the course of the prior seven decades, they had fallen into the depths and slid into this small hollow, which now bore a macabre name. Images had spread around the world as the hands, heads, and legs of frozen corpses had emerged. Coincidentally or otherwise, many of them had pointed uphill, as if to warn their successors against

going any farther.

Under imaginably difficult conditions, the bodies had been salvaged and delivered to their relatives. Then, after endless diplomatic wrangling, a memorial had been built. 67 arms made of granite, each weighing a tonne, all pointing in the direction of the summit. The Field of Fools.

“Are you expecting us to get out here?” Sheperk asked, pulling Adams out of his reverie. The flounder was hovering low over the arms.

“No. But you should turn your ship a little to port and take a tight turn behind the last arm.”

“And then?”

“We wait.” Adams looked at the time. “It will only be a few more minutes.”

Horatiom, an Azerbaijani artist of international renown, had risked his life to complete this work. In doing so, he had enhanced his reputation so much that collectors had been falling over themselves to buy his weighty sculptures ever since.

The sun sank. It reached the half-moon depression on the Abruzzi Spur that bathed the Field of Fools in full sunlight for just a few minutes.

“Look! Over there!” Adams said to the Fantan.

The flounder’s upper dome appeared to turn transparent. No doubt it was actually camera footage displayed on the inside of the smooth surface, but the illusion was breathtaking.

Now! The sun shone, just as the weather forecasters had predicted in Terrania. They were in the right place. Far below, in Camp 3 at 5,750 meters, all present would now look up as well, eager to preserve this moment in their memories forever. Some of them would turn around then; others would only be further strengthened in their determination to reach K2’s summit.

The shadows of the arms embedded in the ice merged into a single image. 67 stone testaments to human curiosity, stupidity, and exploratory spirit joined together to form a giant hand, its index finger pointing up at the sky. Towards the stars, an apparent nothingness that they were closer to here than anywhere else on Earth.

The minutes passed. Outside, endless wind whistled around the rocks and the monoliths. The shadows shifted, wandering slowly onwards, then faded as the sun disappeared behind one of the many bumps of the Abruzzi Spur.

“That is Besun,” said Sheperk. Despite the metallic voice of the translator, Adams thought he could detect the alien being’s awe.

“Yes, it is. One of the most beautiful that I know, and one of the most fleeting. Humans are granted a chance to see it only twenty to thirty days in the year. And only the most daring of humans get to witness it in person.”

Sheperk fell silent for a while. Then he said, “It’s good that you brought me here. It’s only a shame that I cannot take this Besun with me.”

“Quite the opposite. It is good that you can’t take it away from us.”

“I don’t understand.”

Adams didn’t answer. Instead he said, “I’ll gladly lead you to other places.”

“Do it!”

“That makes us partners now, doesn’t it? As compensation, you owe me information about yourself, your people, the technology you use.”

“I am neither authorized nor prepared to talk about my home.”

“You gave me false hope, then? You mean to cheat me?”

“I was not convinced at first, Adams. I wanted a sample of your Besun. Now we can negotiate a price.”

Adams pretended to consider a moment. “I’d like to know more about this auxiliary craft. Tell me how it works. Explain to me the principles of its propulsion system.”

Sheperk looked amused. “What good would that do you? You would never understand it, let alone remember all the details.”

“Then it’s a good deal for you, isn’t it?”

The Fantan was silent for a while. “You don’t even have a recording device. What I tell you would be lost. You could never understand me, after all.”

“Maybe I would remember the principles.”

Sheperk crept out of his wrapping; ran yellowish slime from two small body openings. Was this his way of showing amusement?

“Oh, you poor, foolish human,” he said. “But certainly, if you wish, I’ll give you the information. I will have the onboard computer prepare a visual representation, and you may look at it for a few minutes.”

“Agreed.”

Sheperk wiped the slime with casual movements of his barrel-shaped body, then crept back into his container. “What a shame that you are not of sound mind. I was just starting to like you.”

The flounder accelerated and flew over the Abruzzi Spur, following the setting sun. The Field of Fools lay behind them, the wondrous early work of a genius that he, Homer. G Adams, had once financed.

They visited Jerusalem, the eternal city, and watched from a hiding place as praying Jews leaned their foreheads against the millenia-old stone of the Western Wall, fully absorbed in contemplation.

The flounder's next stop was the Vienna State Opera. Thanks to Adams's connections and financial means, they were able to enter the building through a little-known subterranean tunnel that Kaisers had once taken with their carriages. A truly terrified usher, whose nervousness wasn't resolved even by a tip equivalent to his yearly wage, led them discreetly into a darkened box.

Mozart. *The Magic Flute*. A work that was played only seldom in this large opera house, and even more rarely by the first tier of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Adams had pulled out all the stops in advance to get the prime violinists into the orchestra pit.

Adams closed his eyes and listened. He didn't focus on Sheperk any longer. If the Fantan wasn't hearing what *he* was hearing, all this was a waste of time regardless.

The two-hour listening experience had a surprising result, however. When they were brought back into the tunnel (long after the end of the performance), Sheperk said, "The music was pretty. Perhaps a little simple-sounding, but pretty."

"But you didn't find any Besun in it?" Adams asked, disappointed.

"I did, actually. When the people jumped up, began to clap, and gave expression to their enjoyment. That was...was...unbelievable. So honest and so spontaneous."

A mountain on the Sinai Peninsula. A wasteland that looked magnificent in its monotony and held ruins in which history had been written.

An ice hockey match for the International Hockey League in Bern, in front of twenty thousand clamoring fans who cheered their team to victory against the Vancouver Canucks.

Bungee jumping from the Kawarau Bridge near Queenstown in New Zealand. The very place where this special kind of craziness for adrenaline junkies had found its start many decades ago before spreading around the whole world as a sport. Nowadays, contests

were held in six disciplines, from Freestyle to Figure Jumping to Water Dunking. In 2040, individual contests were to be introduced to the Olympic Games in the booming metropolis of Hanoi.

A viewing of the Shell Resort off the coast of Dubai. The first underwater city, anchored to the sea floor right next to the Palm Resort. Glass spires soared out of the water and sparkled brightly. Some of them linked up into bizarre shapes; others looked like solitary works of art. Tubes coming from the water's edge allowed the residents of the city to drive their cars to their luxury apartments.

"There is little Besun here," Sheperk judged.

"Shell Resort is a symbol of architectural daring, but also of excessive wealth with no regard for the problems facing the rest of the world. This, too, is an expression of human behavior, for better or worse."

A slum on the edge of the gargantuan Mexico City. A dome of smog hung over the city, as it so often did. They flew to Sister Necessita's mission, where the sister gave several hundred youths shelter for the night and had to turn away thousands of others at the door because the space and means wouldn't extend that far.

After closing the gates of her mission, she went into the small neighboring chapel and cried as she did every night. Then she put on her friendliest face again before walking over to help the ones she could help today.

"Much Besun," said Sheperk.

"Very much indeed." The darkness hid the small spacecraft while they followed the sister's movements using a flying spy camera.

"Could you do me a favor?" Adams asked the Fantan.

"No," Sheperk replied. "We are doing business. If you want something from me, it will require something in return."

"It would only be a gesture of your goodwill."

“Denied. A deal is a deal. What is it you want, anyway?”

“Only a small thing.” Homer activated his pod, issued a money order to Sister Necessita’s foundation, and printed it. He slid the paper over onto the Fantan’s body. “Please have one of your little mechanical helpers bring this into the sister’s room.”

The Fantan emerged from his container and looked at the paper. “What does it mean?”

“I’m giving her a present.”

“You’re giving her money?”

“A little.” Given the wealth he had amassed, fifty thousand dollars truly was small potatoes.

I’m still calculating in dollars. Soon it will be solar...

“It will achieve next to nothing. The problems on your world are entirely different.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“And yet you do it regardless.”

“Yes.”

“Your mental illness is far more advanced than I feared. But naturally I will fulfill your wish. A deal is a deal.”

A metal arm appeared out of nowhere. It grabbed the money order and slid it into a glass vial, then slid that into a spherical device near Sheperk’s body container. This then merged into the floor, sinking as if into quicksand before disappearing.

A short time later, Adams saw the sphere falling out of the flounder and then gliding at a leisurely pace through the inner courtyard of the far-too-small mission. It went to a narrow stairway separated off from the rest, at the end of which a wooden door awaited. It was ajar. The ball glided inside, set its contents down on a rickety table, then quickly moved away. Not without leaving a

trace behind, however: a waypoint made of phosphorescent light like Adams had never seen before. Without fail, it would lead the sister to the vial containing the money order.

“That’s how one works miracles,” Adams murmured.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking out loud.”

“That is a bad Besun.”

“I know.” Adams considered. “We should be on our way again.”

“I’m inclined to say the same.”

He directed the Fantan to visit Machu Picchu, then an outsider artist commune in the Nevada Desert to watch the artists at work.

Despite all his personal reservations, he then decided to bring Sheperk to a Dutch hospice. He committed an unparalleled taboo violation as the Fantan made another spy camera glide into a patient’s room.

The woman, visibly marked by her cancer, was dictating her last words on her pod. She looked easy and relaxed despite her imminent death. The pain she no doubt felt seemed to be far from her mind. She was ready for her life to end; she was at peace with herself. After she finished speaking, she leaned back, serene. She looked at some antiquated photos on her nightstand, touching them tenderly one after the other. She whispered, “Lovely” and “Over now.”

Then she pressed a switch deep into its socket and turned it counterclockwise. A few seconds later, the self-injected medicine began to take effect.

Silence. A last, short gasp; a trembling of her limbs. Then it was over.

The Fantan stayed quiet for a long time. “There is always much Besun in death, but it’s not remarkable. And yet, there was

something special about the death of this human woman. Unfortunately, I can't quite grasp it. It had something to do with those pictures."

"She wasn't thinking about herself, but about her friends or relatives." Adams wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Perhaps."

They flew on, always on the search for special moments. For images and experiences and artistic offerings that came from the edges of human possibility. Sheperk never let up. He was insatiable in his hunger for Besun. Adams had hardly gotten a minute of sleep between each of their jaunts, and only when he made the Fantan aware that he had reached the end of his capacity did Sheperk grant him six hours of rest.

Adams dreamed of all the things Sheperk had shown him. Images, representations, datasets, mathematical formulas, indications of where Einstein had been wrong. He had absorbed the information and stored it away without reflecting on it. He understood only a thousandth of it anyway, but that didn't matter. The one and only thing that mattered was that he had kept a clear understanding and taken note of all these things.

Dawn broke on August 2, 2036. They spent the morning hours on a lonely atoll in the Pacific. After a detour to a comic convention in New York and a tour of the catacombs of Paris, they again paused at Adams's request. They were now just floating over the hermitage of Charles de Foucauld on the Assekrem plateau in the Hoggar Mountains.

"How are you finding our business arrangement so far?" he asked Sheperk.

"I'm satisfied. Are you?"

"Yes. But we could raise it to a new level."

"I don't understand."

"What I have shown you so far is Besun *itself*. It's valuable,

certainly. But I can give you something that's both far bigger and significantly more important."

"Impossible!"

"Is that so?" Adams smiled, even though he knew the Fantan couldn't read the changes in his demeanor. "What do you think about this: I can hold on to the moment inside me. For all time. Until the end of my life. It is inside me, and I could describe it to you anytime, down to the tiniest detail. Even how I felt as it was occurring."

"That would be admirable. But what does it have to do with me?"

Homer paused. Again, a memory of Stemp welled up, as it had so often in the last few days. The actor, tired now, and with a wisdom bestowed upon him by old age. And he had been totally sober when Adams had lamented to him about his sadness over love affairs. What had given him this urge, he couldn't have said in retrospect.

"I've had trouble with every special lady I've had in my entire life," Stemp had replied, acting as though this amazed him. "Not a single one could understand that my first love is the theater...and that I need variety. Impulses from outside. An influx of fresh ideas."

"Mistresses, in other words," Adams had dared to interject.

"As I said: muses. And do you think that a woman has ever mustered any understanding for my *savoir-vivre*? No, far from it! They made dreadful scenes."

With a sharp index finger, Stemp had pointed at Adams. "I eventually learned my lesson from the experiences of countless private mudslinging matches. And do you know what, my dear Gershwin? The bottom line was that when you've gone head to head, when all arguments have been aired...when you and your partner sink to the ground, totally exhausted, and you make a mutual promise to one another—telling this woman, who you do love, that you'll only tell the complete truth from now on, to put all problems out of the world forever...then there is only one option."

Stemp had sounded entirely serious, and Adams had been sure that he meant what he said when he spoke the last words of their conversation: “In this situation you must lie, lie, lie.”

Adams returned to the present. He said to Sheperk, “I can teach you to hold on to the moment. To hold on to the Besun.”

7.

Perry Rhodan

Ferrol

They went down towards the villagers and met them halfway, right by a well about a hundred meters from the nearest houses of the small settlement. The Ferrons were led by an older man who was clasping his weapon so tightly that the bones stood out pale blue. It would be hard to convince the somber-looking man of their good intentions.

“There is nothing for you here,” the leader directed at Chaktor, not honoring Rhodan with a glance. “Take these aliens away. Otherwise you will regret it.”

“I am Perry Rhodan,” the astronaut said, stepping over to the man. “My spacecraft had to make an emergency landing and—”

Clack. Clack. Clack. The barrels of several weapons were aimed at him. Two adolescents who had pushed through to the front nervously fingered the triggers.

“Tell this creature that he is only a finger twitch away from his death.”

“Tell your people to lower their weapons,” Rhodan remarked. “Otherwise...”

The old Ferron sneered. He looked at Rhodan for the first time. “I wonder who you are. Allies of the Topsidans? The beings who are putting in every effort to destroy our land and our work?”

“We are allies of the Thort.”

“Strange that we have never heard of any such allies.”

“Do you believe the Red Palace informs every village idiot of its political intentions? In times like these, when Ferrol is only one

blink of an eye away from its downfall? Certainly not!" He made an imperious hand gesture and said with a louder, more authoritarian voice, "Lay your weapons aside and listen to me!"

Chaktor drew in breath; Menet let out a kind of laugh. Was the Swamp Ferron starting to approve of him after all? Did he perceive Rhodan's words as courageous, not hearing the doubt lurking behind them?

The two adolescents pulled back as if they were used to this kind of commanding tone. Two other armed men similarly lowered their weapons. All the other Ferrons stared with uncertain eyes at their leader, who looked full of consternation.

"We must get to Thort as quickly as possible," Rhodan continued assertively. "We have important information for him. Knowledge that could end the Topsidian invasion. And you will help us in our endeavor. Is that understood?"

The leader made himself look as unperturbed as he could, but Rhodan saw that the conversation had gone far beyond his mental horizons. The Ferron tilted his head in the direction of the city.

"All that over there has nothing to do with us. The destruction is a punishment for all the sins the residents of Thorta have committed. May they all die, that useless pack of—"

"And the Topsidans will leave *you* in peace, right? Because you're such good, diligent people, they'll let you go on cultivating the fields."

"They will conquer the cities and the suburbs, but they won't be dumb enough to destroy the agrarian land and kill us."

Rhodan was confronted with an argument that he knew very well from Earth. Localism was no privilege of humans. *According to some intellectual bumpkins, global warming isn't happening at all. There's also no continuing destruction of the ozone layer. Climate change is waved aside with reference to God's will.*

"You will leave our land," the villager continued. He was

gradually regaining his courage. “Find some other idiots to take you to that den of sin called Thorta.”

Wuriu Sengu stepped up to Rhodan’s side and whispered a few words into his ear. Rhodan listened attentively and could hardly suppress a laugh. Now, if no one lost their nerve, they had as good as won. He informed Tschubai and Wuriu of his plan, then indicated for them to step back behind him.

“I think the sin has long since found a home in this tranquil place,” Rhodan said. “And if I follow your idiosyncratic logic, that means the Topsidans very likely *will* turn their attention to your village after all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My friends here have special gifts.” He gestured behind him at the two mutants. “They would be willing to use them for your benefit. Only, it seems to me you haven’t earned our help at all. Especially not you, my friend.”

“That is *enough*! I’m going to—”

A shadow appeared next to the man and then disappeared straight away. It took the leader of the Ferron farmers along with it, leaving only footprints in the soil. Tschubai had carried out his task admirably.

“Before you start getting any stupid ideas,” Rhodan said to the shocked villagers, “please listen to what I have to say.”

Menet sat directly in front of him in the boat. Rhodan smiled to himself; no doubt the Swamp Ferron was burning with curiosity.

“What do you think of our boat?” he asked him.

“It sits well in the water, but the construction is pathetic,” Menet said disparagingly. “No one places any value in quality workmanship anymore.”

“And you’re capable of judging that?”

"Yes."

Menet had not lost his overwhelming self-confidence, even if this region had little in common with his home environment, the swamps.

I'll let him stew for a while. At some point his curiosity will have him close to bursting.

Two gas turbines pushed the boat quietly forward while Chaktor steered it with surprising skill. The Ferron spacefarer was proving himself an all-rounder once again. The refueling, carried out at parking spots regular distances apart, went smoothly as well. Fermentation gases from under the wetlands were pumped out and compressed. Ferrol provided natural resources that were used effectively by its inhabitants.

"This area has a multitude of power stations that aren't visible to the naked eye," Chaktor explained in response to Rhodan's question. "They're built underground and automated as much as possible. We don't only use surface-level fermentation gases for energy extraction. We also draw on supplies at greater depths." He pointed into the now-cloudy sky. Lightning flashed across it from time to time that could in no way be of natural origin. "Our enemies will not be able to totally destroy our energy generation industry. At least not in the next few days."

Chaktor was being optimistic. The secret of the underground facilities would not be one for much longer. The Topsidans only needed a single prisoner to find out the truth, and then they'd begin with saturation bombing if Rhodan estimated the lizard beings correctly. Which in turn meant that the wetlands of Derrwash might soon become a warzone.

The waterways, called Wouffars, offered the quickest means of movement in this strange, quiet land. No one had ever thought of draining the vast area and covering it over with roads. The traffic was largely at a standstill due to the Topsiders' invasion, but under normal conditions it ran steadily across the crisscrossed network of rivers.

The current was slow despite the depth of up to twenty meters. Every so often, they passed through crossings where the turbulence was held in check by an elaborate sluice system.

Menet hit his neck and removed the green mush/sludge of an insect from his skin. He did it indifferently, without sparing a second thought for the bloodsucker.

Rhodan's gaze met Menet's again. The man observed him. He wiped his hand on the wooden rail, then pointed in the direction of the fields on the northern bank.

"The eternal cycle has been disturbed," he said. "The ears are ripe, but the harvest cannot be gathered. Because of you and those like you."

"I can't listen to these accusations anymore, Menet. We humans are not to blame for this invasion."

"But you bring change." The Swamp Ferron grew quieter. "Chaktor is firmly convinced of your good intentions. He believes that your mere presence on Ferrol will change everything. What if he's wrong? If you disappoint him and others?"

"I'm just a man. I can't work miracles. That will become clear to Chaktor at some point."

"And until then you'll take advantage of him and his good nature?"

Something rustled on the bank. Lightning-fast, Rhodan ducked behind the simple cabin that was the only structure on the boat. Menet stayed calm, however.

"A Warni," he said. "A bank dweller that feeds on drifting algae. It won't do anything to us."

He pointed at a floating lump that suddenly puffed up and turned into a creature reminiscent of a hippopotamus. The Warni turned over and made its belly protrude from the water. A flock of birds descended onto it voraciously and picked long red worms from its wrinkled skin.

“Everything is so peaceful,” said Rhodan.

“You think so?” Menet smiled vaguely. It looked bitter. “On a day like this, the farmers are supposed to be out in the fields. They should be corralling and milking the wild *Parosan goats*, driving away pests, starting the harvest. But nothing is happening.”

Rhodan drank boiled water. He didn’t want to listen to Menet’s accusations anymore. The Swamp Ferron was repeating himself by now.

“So, how did you do it?” Menet finally asked.

“Do what?”

“Don’t take me for a fool, Perry Rhodan! You know exactly what I want to know.” Menet balanced the blade of his knife on his outstretched index finger.

“You want to know how I managed to convince the villagers to let us go and hand over the boat?” Rhodan was having fun keeping the Swamp Ferron in suspense.

“What else?!” Menet flung the knife high into the air. It spun several times, then fell down and bored into the wood a few centimeters from Rhodan’s thigh.

Rhodan pulled it out with a jerk and handed it back to the Swamp Ferron, unfazed. “My friends have special gifts, as I mentioned. Ras has mastery of teleportation.”

“The principle is known to me. In old Ferron stories, there are fabled figures, who had such…special gifts.” His voice sounded awestruck now. “But to actually see it for myself…”

“I tasked Ras with taking the old man away and clarifying the situation for him.”

“That was all?” Menet looked disappointed. “A simple threat was enough to make his opinion do a 180 degree turn?”

“A threat alone wouldn’t have done it. You saw how stubborn he

was. We had to present a good argument." Rhodan grinned. "And we had one. Wuriu also has an unusual ability, and it was very helpful here."

"And what is that?"

"He sees things that others don't," said Rhodan vaguely. "And he was watching the man's wife as he approached us. She was doing things that were—let's just say—delicate."

"You blackmailed the man, then."

"It was *very* delicate. If I had said one word about it, he and his wife would have been tarred and feathered and ultimately driven out of their tranquil village. Naturally, our friend didn't want to risk that. And as a sign of his goodwill, he made this available to us." Rhodan stretched his arms out wide.

"What exactly did Wuriu Sengu see?"

"My companion is a sensitive soul." Rhodan gazed at Menet seriously. "He wouldn't want me to pass on secrets that he entrusted to me and Ras. He already finds it difficult to come to grips with his gift, and he doesn't want too much fuss made about it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No," said Menet. "But I accept your desire for privacy. It honors you." He stood up and plodded away, over to Chaktor, who stood at the bow and was steering the ship with a network of rope hoists.

Rhodan drew in fresh air and looked towards their destination. They were gliding through calm water right now, parallel to the hill range to the north, behind which lay Thorta. At the next "intersection" they would change direction and finally, *finally* come physically closer to their goal.

"Smoke. And fire," said Wuriu. He pointed past Rhodan, past the tall reed grass.

He was right. A dark billow of smoke was coming towards them. A pungent smell spread, and blowing with it the sighing and crying and lamenting of Ferrons.

Soon, battered and sometimes heavily damaged ships swayed past them in horrifying silence. Ferrons looked at them, women and children. Only a few made any sound. They had empty faces covered in soot. Those who were injured moaned softly. Incoming fog swallowed the ships as they passed, making the events seem even more spectral.

After around twenty boats, the haunting procession stopped for a while. Maybe these victims of the war had come from a small town just bombed for the first time. Maybe one boat had followed the next in a desperate, aimless escape.

“That does not look good at all,” said Chaktor.

“City folk,” Menet added and spat into the water. “From Thorta. You can recognize them from their clothes.” He gripped the rail, his upper arm muscles bulging visibly.

Their boat steered towards the next crossing. Wooden posts with whitewashed upper edges were dotted about seemingly at random, but they were part of the system for directing the water traffic. Rhodan still did not understand it.

“Port,” Chaktor said unnecessarily. He pulled at his metal steering ropes and the roughly ten-meter-long boat languidly obeyed.

The water crossing now lay open before them. In the center, driftwood whirled in the circle of a whirlpool; silt had amassed on the banks. A boat about half the size of theirs had capsized and was now drifting from side to side while upside-down. It collided against the wooden boards again and again. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* Apart from this unnerving sound and the soft gurgling of the water, not a sound could be heard.

“The excavation works have been neglected for at least three days,” Chaktor asserted.

“The Simjans fled at the first opportunity,” Menet added.

“Simjans?” Rhodan asked.

“Members of a tribe from the east. Migrant workers. Cowards.” Menet shook his head, disgusted.

Chaktor pointed to port, in the direction he had just steered the ship. A wreck was floating towards them. “More refugees,” he said. “Clearly stragglers.”

A deafening racket sounded. Suddenly a wall of water rose up in front of them. Wind swept over them, turning into a storm gust that gained ever more force and threw them off their feet.

Rhodan’s back slammed against the cabin, then he whirled past it. Somehow he grabbed hold of a rope. He clutched it firmly, fighting against the forces, against the water that swept over them in waves several meters high.

A bomb of unknown explosive power—*A floating mine?*—had exploded in the water. Had they been the target, or had it been the pathetically battered barge coming towards them?

Their ship swayed, threatening to tip over and capsize. It listed sideways. Ever more weight bore down on Rhodan’s arms and shoulders. Enough that he didn’t think he could take it much longer. Somehow he wrapped the rope around his left arm before he had to let go, trusting that he’d be able to free himself quickly enough if the boat really did capsize and he was pulled into the deep.

Hold your breath. Stay calm.

More waves swept over him, dragging him back and forth. His arm almost came out of its socket. He had to breathe, dammit! Seconds became an eternity. His lungs, already stretched to their limit on this alien world, felt like they would explode.

The chaos ended with a moment of complete stillness. Rhodan thought he was floating in the air weightless for a second, about three meters above the deck of their ship. Then he crashed down, dragged to the ground by 1.4 gravos. He rushed to breathe in and out again, readying himself for the impact—but he was too late nonetheless. Far too quickly he slammed against the deck and all

the air was driven out of his body once again.

The boat righted itself as if in slow motion. Rhodan released his left arm from the rope but kept holding it tightly as he stood up. He coughed, then bent aside and vomited some water.

Don't think about the pain! You have to find the others! They might need your help!

Chaktor was there. Pale blue, but conscious. He had gotten snarled up in the steering cables. Wuriu and Baturin were wedged together, stuck in the cabin door. Tschubai had disappeared.

Perhaps he teleported away in the moment of danger.

And Menet? Where was the Swamp Ferron?

Rhodan turned in a circle as their ship gradually came to rest again. He could not see the proud Warani anywhere.

There!

One hand reached up onto the starboard deck, grasping for purchase on the wet planks, then the other. Head and shoulders followed. Menet pushed himself up. His forehead was bleeding heavily. He had slipped overboard, but he was almost back.

The water grew restless. Menet let out a suffocated scream and disappeared with a sudden jerk, pulled backwards, deeper into the foaming water.

Rhodan didn't think for long. He looked around. Looked for something that would serve as a weapon.

A raft pole with a metal hook. He had no idea what it was doing on board or how it had avoided falling into the water. He didn't worry about that. He grabbed the pole and hurried to the starboard rail. The thing was heavier than he had expected.

The water was still foaming. Menet's head appeared for a second. He gasped for breath and was then pulled down again by a fish-like being with fins divided in two, looking like an octopus's tentacles.

Small eyes looked out above a giant mouth with several rows of gleaming teeth.

Menet had kept hold of his knife. He stabbed at his aggressor again and again. He cleaved the water with unbelievable force and landed one blow after another, but the river shark didn't give in. Its mouth snapped dangerously close to the Ferron's head, the tentacles whipping against his back.

Rhodan waited for the right moment until the river shark was right alongside the boat. Then he struck as if wielding an antiquated threshing flail. The hook of the raft pole drove deep into the alien creature's flesh. Yellow-green blood spurted out of the wound and floated like an expanding film of oil on the water's surface.

The river shark's attacks became even angrier and its movements more uncoordinated. It beat against the ship's hull again and again, raging and letting out shrill, bloodcurdling cries. It didn't know who or what was attacking it. It threw itself around, irritated by the many surface injuries that Menet had delivered and wounded by the raft hook deep in its fatty tissue.

Rhodan couldn't maintain his grip any longer. He had done his best, but the river shark tore itself away with several violent strikes of its tentacles. It swam away rapidly, leaving Menet behind and letting out cries that sounded pitiful. The raft pole still stuck out from its side like a harpoon. It had soon reached the middle of the waterway. There it disappeared, no doubt descending to the deepest point of the riverbed. It wouldn't get far, though. Other predators had picked up the trail of its blood. Here and there, the water rippled as more river sharks pursued the injured creature.

Rhodan gave Menet his hand and helped him out of the water. The Swamp Ferron pulled himself up. He wheezed and looked weakened, but he didn't seem to have lost any of the contempt he harbored towards the human. A glance and a short nod were all he had for Rhodan. No word of thanks; nothing.

"We have to take care of *that there*," he said instead, pointing towards the Ferron shipwreck that the floating mine had no doubt been meant for.

Rhodan was dizzy. He had to squint to see what was happening around 150 meters ahead of them near the opposite bank.

Topsidans appeared. Dark brown lizard beings that awakened a primal fear in humans. That awakened fear *in him*.

They move so quickly. They're formidably muscular and lithe in equal measure. The teeth. The fangs. The whipping tails… It shook him. Rhodan had been fearing this moment. He had wanted to go into his first encounter with these strange creatures without prejudice, had wanted to learn to understand their motives. But he couldn't do it. He feared them, and this fear gave rise to fury. Rage that he struggled to suppress.

The Topsidans hovered low over the water in their suits or in small collection vehicles, looking for survivors of the explosion. They didn't worry about the boat carrying Rhodan and his companions for now, no doubt sure that they couldn't get away.

"They're killing the few armed ones," Menet reported with barely concealed anger. "If anyone's too weak to get themselves to shore, they're letting them drown or be eaten by the river sharks. And the ones who do manage it are being taken prisoner."

Several lizard beings approached the wreck from the bank. They let out drawn-out cries and brandished weapons, no doubt aware of the terrifying effect they had on the Ferrons, which they applied with purpose. Several women trying to flee along the muddy bank were captured with nets; a young lad with striking red hair was incapacited with a stun gun.

The invaders were everywhere. Transport platforms flew low over the water to search for other survivors, firing beam weapons at anything that moved. One in a shining, lacquered-looking uniform pointed in Rhodan's direction and bellowed orders. Two of the dish-like transporters abruptly changed course and crossed the water, coming towards them at an almost sedate pace, the riders confidently aware that their prey could not escape.

Ras Tschubai suddenly appeared next to Rhodan. He stank; his clothes were filthy. "I can bring you all to safety," he said without

any mention of his disappearance, and coughed strainedly. “Not far from here there are a bunch of mud pools we can hide in.”

Shots rang out. Three or four Ferrons were putting up a resistance. Instantly, Topsidans streamed in from all directions and responded to the fire with beam weapons. Some of them carried protective suits that looked like cheap versions of Arkonide battledresses. The lizards outclassed the Ferrons in almost every respect.

The two transport platforms had come almost halfway across the water. The riders cried out something that the translator didn’t catch. It was probably a kind of demand to not put up any resistance.

“They’re slaughtering our people,” said Chaktor. “Just look!”

A Ferron woman, barely more than a girl, flew into a panic. With hands and feet, she struggled against her captors. A Topsidan punched her brutally in the stomach and the head until her body went limp and sank straight to the floor.

“We will *not* run away!” Rhodan determined. “We will help the refugees.”

“Have you gone crazy?” Baturin shouted. “There are at least fifty trained soldiers there! What are we going to do against superior numbers like that? We don’t even have any weapons!”

Rhodan paid him no mind. He waved Wuriu over and made clear what he needed with just a few words. Then he instructed Tschubai. The teleporter’s eyelids twitched nervously, but he otherwise gave no sign of how he felt about the task. It once again came down to the mutants, and in particular to Ras Tschubai. The two had to coordinate their abilities and work together.

The platforms were close now, maybe thirty meters away. Their riders were distracted by an individual refugee who was swimming into the middle of the river, ignoring all the dangers. They followed him, hunting him down with all the playful joy of a predatory animal.

Ras Tschubai vanished.

“What is he going to do?” Chaktor asked.

“On my orders, Wuriu looked for more floating mines...and found them.”

“You mean...”

“Yes.”

It was hair-raising, what Rhodan had demanded of Tschubai. Nonetheless, the mutant had obeyed without hesitation. If he got to the floating mine and it reacted to his touch or his body heat, that was it for the Sudanese man. Rhodan was trusting that igniting the initial explosive would depend on several factors, such as changes in pressure, noise, or the magnetic field.

Anxious seconds passed. The Topsiders on the platforms had successfully ended their hunt, picked up the escapee, and shot him in cold blood. Rhodan balled his hands into fists. The feeling of powerlessness was growing stronger and stronger.

In the sky above the two Topsidian vehicles, a speck appeared: Tschubai. He had salvaged the mine and teleported with it. He dropped the weapon on the enemy from a great height. Then he was gone again—and appeared instantly at the back of their group’s boat, plummeting to the floor with a loud cry of pain.

Rhodan wanted to rush over and help him, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the falling bomb. The Topsidans had no idea what awaited them. They were still raising their weapons, consumed by the fever of hunting and fighting, in joyful anticipation of the new easy prey that Rhodan and his companions represented.

“Down!” he ordered. His companions obeyed.

The bomb smashed through one of the dishes and smacked against the water’s surface with a splash. Then it exploded and ripped the life from more than a dozen Topsidans, along with their equipment.

The battle that had just subsided took on a new momentum unexpected by the Topsidans. Injured people shrieked; debris flew in all directions; armed forces fired into the unknown from the other bank, not aware that Rhodan and his men were the new threat.

"Good!" said Menet ferociously. "Very good!" He got to his feet again after the shockwave had subsided. A splinter was stuck in his cheek. He pulled it out with a jerk and threw it to the floor.

Rhodan hurried over to Tschubai. The mutant got to his feet by himself; there was no more sign of the weakness he had only just shown. He demonstrated a remarkable mental and physical constitution.

"Next goal, Perry?" he asked.

"We need weapons. Do you think—"

Another explosion. And another. On the far bank, Topsidans plunged into the water, hit by heavy fire. An amphibious vehicle pushed up out of the surge at a steep angle and splashed against the surface. Then another, and another. Armed Ferrons rushed out of the reeds; with sloshing steps, they approached the enemy. Their wide "snowshoes" let them advance quickly along the marshy riverbank.

"Those are troops of the second infantry from Thorta!" Chaktor cried, full of reverence. "Members of an elite unit!"

The Ferrons made short work of their surprised enemies. They freed the hostages and incapacitated any Topsidans who offered resistance.

The lizards surrendered quickly. *Far too quickly!* Rhodan thought —and at the same moment, he was shocked by his own mindset. He was so full of rage at the invaders' ruthless violence that he felt no sympathy for them at all.

One of the lizard beings floated into the middle of the waterway. He turned several times around his own axis, was dragged into a

small whirlpool, then abruptly disappeared. Bubbling and foaming water revealed that wild river creatures were fighting over the unexpected prey.

“We should arm ourselves,” said the Warani, pointing to additional Topsidan corpses floating by. One of them was beating against the hull of their boat to the rhythm of the soft waves.

Rhodan nodded. They didn’t know what to expect. More lizard units might still be hanging around nearby.

On the other side of the bank, the skirmishes gradually came to an end. The Ferrons overpowered their last opponents and freed the loudly jubilating prisoners, mainly women and children. Chaktor too joined in with the general cheering and enthusiastically raised both hands into the air. Menet remained cool. Using more raft poles that were anchored along the railing, he fished for dead Topsidians alongside Baturin, Sengu, and Rhodan.

They managed to salvage three of the beings and put their bodies into a pile. The lizards carried knives, handguns, and long-barreled beam weapons whose activation mechanisms were a struggle for human and Ferron fingers.

“They have six fingers,” Rhodan said, gripping the hand of one of the corpses. “They grip differently, probably using two for the trigger.”

He suddenly felt the scaly finger of the supposedly dead man clench around his hand. The Topsidan was alive! He wanted to let go and jump back, his reflexive urge telling him to get himself to safety, but he couldn’t free himself.

Menet reacted first and came to Rhodan’s aid. He tried to release the alien’s grip—Rhodan’s assailant was the uppermost one on the pile—and failed. Even together, they couldn’t overcome the lizard’s unrestrained strength.

Rhodan rattled and shook, trying to get away. The beast turned his head to look at the human over his flat snout, opened his mouth, and hissed something in his mother tongue. He bared his

long fangs, pushed himself sideways, and then suddenly collapsed again.

His grip loosened, and the Topsidan rolled off the bodies of his two companions and onto the wooden floor. He was dead.

Rhodan wiped his hand on his pant leg. The touch had felt cold and slick. A sense of disgust ran through him.

The translator on his chest came to life.

“Standard Topsidian Language,” it said. “Basic vocabulary available. Translation will follow.”

There was a brief pause. Then further words droned out of the device, the translation of what the lizard being had said.

“Third Clause of the Social Directive: Respect life.”

8.

Tako Kakuta

Ferrol

They all found a place on the copter. The four Ferrons stayed seated in the central sphere; the humans spread themselves out on the booms. Above and beside them, the rotors moved, generating hardly bearable noise that only let up a little once they had risen up into the air.

Anne Sloane kept watch over Deringhouse. Her own paleness was no longer all that distinct from that of the injured man. Rod Nyssen and Darya Morozova perched on the booms to the left and right of Kakuta, packed into emergency transport frames and protected from the wind and weather by domes of a strange transparent plastic.

Fajon had insisted on traveling with Kakuta. Being so close to the woman unnerved him, but he didn't let it show. Her wheelchair, climbing frame, vehicle—whatever you wanted to call it—had been packed up so that it took up minimal space and was anchored to the connecting strut leading to the central sphere. The Ferron had secured herself to one of the two cross-pieces with straps while Kakuta perched on the other. They were sitting like chickens on roosting poles, but it didn't seem to bother her.

"My legs have gotten thin," she said critically as she noticed Kakuta's scrutinizing glances. "And I have far too much meat on my hips now."

"Yeah." Nothing more occurred to him. Was Fajon maybe expecting him to come up with a witty observation? "You call us Lightbringers," he said, changing the subject. "Why?"

Fajon furrowed her brow. The wrinkles took on a lighter color than the surrounding skin. "There are ancient myths on Ferrol. Children's songs. Legends. Stories. Call them what you will, it

doesn't matter in practice. They are known on all settled worlds, across every country, and in the homes of every tribe. They are perhaps the only thing we Ferrons *really* all have in common. Excepting our recognition of the Thort, of course."

And you believe so strongly in your myths that you stick the label "Lightbringer" on the first people who come along? On Earth they'd lock you all away.

"You might think we're crazy," she continued contemplatively. "But believe me, we're not." Her chest rose and fell quickly. She wrestled with the words. "I'd never have thought it was true, what my great-grandmother told me once just before she died. She said that I would feel the *coming of the light*. In here, deep inside me." She pointed to her stomach.

"You trust your gut feeling?"

Fajon grinned. "For someone who could be treated as a god if you were a little smoother, you sell yourself pretty poorly."

"I... We're not gods. We're humans."

"And Lightbringers."

For the woman, the topic was over. Maybe she herself didn't know what else to say, or maybe she was fighting with her own irrational side.

He changed the subject again. "Where is it you're taking us?"

"To Hom-aut, the man who healed me. He specializes in patients with difficult conditions."

"A doctor?"

"A friend," Fajon replied evasively.

Kakuta fell silent. The woman trusted this Hom-aut, so he had to as well.

They flew over the rugged mountain peaks that Fajon had called

Poaffait's Cores. He saw chalky white rock walls, gravelly slopes, melting ice at the end of a narrow glacier tongue, bright green mountain lakes, deep, inaccessible valleys, imposing giant trees. Nowhere was there any sign of civilization with the exception of a few small huts that no doubt served to give hikers and climbers some shelter.

"The area looks like it's barely inhabited," he observed.

"The land belongs to the Lorar tribe. They rarely grant visas to the members of other tribes. They protect their territory's natural environment." The corners of her mouth fell. "The Topsidans won't pay any mind to the tribes' unique traits, I suppose."

"Can I ask a personal question?"

"You want to know why we were mountain climbing even though we knew about the lizard invasion?"

"Correct."

They were now flying over a torrential river that flowed over several cataracts and out into the depths of a narrow gorge before splashing into a circular lake on the valley floor. Water vapor rose all the way to their two-hundred-meter height and fogged the transparent sheeting.

"I am *gahjem*. Marked. I had an accident that almost cost me my life. Since then, I've been disabled from the waist down, as you can see." Fajon stared into the depths, past Kakuta. "I alone am to blame for my fate; I cannot accuse anyone else. Anyway, the healing process for my body and mind took several years. Thanks to Hom-aut, I kept my will to live. He persuaded me to set a goal. A task that I should tackle as soon as the Reha was completed."

The copter started to descend. From between fir-like trees, their branches jutting out farther than their Earth equivalents, a white building appeared with round pavilions arranged around it. Their destination was close.

"I lay down there, in the care of Hom-aut and his team. It took

years for him to drag me out of my stupor. Day after day, I gazed out at the mountain ranges without consciously taking them in. But eventually there was a click. I knew that if I ever found the strength to move on my own again, I would climb the Corns. That was what kept me going." Again she stared blankly into the distance. "The day before yesterday, right when I wanted to honor my promise, the news came of the Topsidian invasion." Fajon smiled. "That didn't mean much to me. Life and war and death... Those were expressions that I'd learned to interpret anew. So I decided to attempt the climb despite everything."

"You achieved the remarkable."

"Thanks to my husbands. They supported me all the way."

"Your...*husbands?!*"

Fajon yelped with laughter. "You may be a Lightbringer, but right now you look like the silliest simpleton. Do you mean to say there's no polyandry where you're from?"

"N... No."

"Sad, very sad." She wiped a hand across her eyes, perhaps as a gesture of commiseration. "Some tribes, including mine, the Kround, maintain this good old custom."

"And such a system works?" This did not even remotely match Kakuta's worldview.

"I think so. Ask my husbands. They look pretty happy, don't they?"

The copter approached a signposted zone and parked beside two other aircraft. One resembled an Earth helicopter; the other was disc-shaped, with jet beam propulsion units on its flattened sides.

Their vehicle's rotors seemed to work both with and against each other now. The copter tipped forwards a little, then swung back. Then it turned 180 degrees before sinking to the ground, soft as a feather.

Ferrons came running over, crouched low. Among them was a diminutive figure, maybe 1.3 meters tall, with a fiery red mustache that was white at the tips.

"Can't I let you out of my sight for even one day?" asked the man, releasing the straps around Fajon's body. "Where's the gurney?" he shouted. "Where's my equipment? Hurry up!"

Other Ferrons surrounded them. They retrieved the wounded Deringhouse and laid him on a gurney, affording the humans, Kakuta in particular, shy gazes. He felt uncomfortable. What exactly did the Ferrons see in him?

"Lightbringers, you say?" Hom-aut directed at Fajon. "Legendary figures and fairy tales that will help us in the fight against the Topsidans? Bah! I don't see anything special about this one here. He bleeds and dies like one of us."

"Enough of your endless carping, old man! Can you help him or not?"

"'Or not,' I would say, if these ninnies who call themselves my assistants don't pick up the pace."

Suddenly, everything he'd forgotten about during the tranquility of the flight came flooding back. The fear, the worries about Deringhouse, the foreignness of the environment and these blue-skinned beings. Hom-aut's body language was so different from anything he was used to. The mustached man sniffed and stamped with both feet like a vengeful *Goryo* spirit. He placed his instruments inside his breast pocket only to pull them out again straight away and wipe them off on a wide strap stretched over his thigh.

"Your friend will be good as new," Fajon said. She was sitting on the ground tinkering with her movement frame. Within a few seconds, she had unfolded and expanded it. She lifted herself up into the seat and indicated for the humans to follow her and Hom-aut.

Where did the Ferron woman get her optimism and drive? What

kind of a fate had she suffered? Ws it comparable to Kakuta's formative childhood in Fukushima?

They reached the main building. The huge entryway was covered with rune-like symbols. A Ferron, one whose sense of direction seemed to be challenged and whose arms trembled continually, was busy chiseling the outline of an abstract image into the cover panel. He paused his work as Fajon went past him. She hugged him like an old friend, then proceeded into the forecourt of a palatial building dominated by a fountain lit up in various colors.

Hom-aut scurried onwards, always at Deringhouse's side. He conversed quietly with Anne Sloane, who was no doubt trying to make the doctor comprehend her role in keeping the injured man alive.

They turned left, past statues, works of art consisting of metal springs and screws—and a hanging cage with a Ferron sitting in it. Over and over, he let out loud cries and rattled the bars, even though the door to freedom was wide open.

Kakuta could only wonder. He saw Ferrons he perceived as nurses and doctors; next to them, blue-skinned people who looked crazy or absorbed in meditation, appearing to be entirely at peace with themselves. Ferrons who were using workout equipment. Ones with missing arms and legs replaced by metal prostheses. Children, women and men, old and young, fat and thin, happy and sad...

It was a chaotic mixture that Kakuta couldn't make sense of. In no way could he connect this to his mental image of hospitals on Earth.

"What is this place?" he asked, baffled.

"A healing house," Fajon replied. "What else would it be?"

"So sick Ferrons are restored to health here?"

The Ferron laughed. "I don't fully understand your question, but it's not only a home for those who are injured or suffering." She pointed to a dancer who was spinning pirouettes along the corridor.

“Our doctors are concerned about the entirety of Ferron wellbeing. Healthy people learn just as well from sick ones as the other way around. They tell stories, give each other courage in difficult situations. Ferrons who suffer difficult fates help those who are afflicted by melancholy, or even those who are doing fine, to be truly happy.”

“I think I follow,” he replied, watching a child with eyes positioned too closely, who was murmuring untranslatable things.

“I will serve here one day,” Fajon continued. “Learning and teaching. Both should always be intertwined.”

“And this system works?”

“Of course!” The woman’s tone suggested this went without saying. “Do you treat the ill among you differently somehow, Lightbringer?”

“Yes.” Kakuta bent his shoulders. He didn’t know why, but he felt ashamed. He quickly straightened himself again. He had let himself be distracted and forgotten why they were there. What was going on with Deringhouse? Where were he, the doctor, and Sloane?

Fajon grasped his arm and pulled him towards a ramp that led in a semicircle up to the next floor. “Come!” she said. “You must be tired and hungry, and you desperately need fresh clothes. Let me take care of you while Hom-aut does his work.”

Kakuta nodded uncertainly. He waved for Morozova and Nyssen to follow him. He trusted the Ferrons, but would the doctor make sense of Deringhouse’s alien metabolism? Didn’t he need anyone to help him?

Anne is with him. Thanks to her gift, she knows far more about the human body than I’ll ever learn. She senses the blood pumping through his veins. She can keep a terminal patient alive with the power of her mind!

“Anne is very weak,” he explained. “The woman who went with

Hom-aut. Someone has to take care of her."

"Trust the Masterbreaker. He has a sense for these things."

They reached the upper floor. A door, six or seven meters tall, abruptly opened to let them outside. They stepped onto a balcony covered in millions of mosaic stones; in the evening twilight, it gave a breathtaking view of the mountain ranges they'd just flown over in the copter.

"This was where I lay," said Dajon, her attention suddenly far, far away. "For days. Months. My gaze always directed into the distance while Lamin-uterkam and Smaiadakk, two members of my tribe with bipolar disorders, laid the mosaics, never stopping. The pictures grew around me while the mountains only slightly changed. First the peaks were covered in ice, then wild waters thundered in the valleys, and the green of spring clung to the most unlikely places. In early summer, I could hear the Fafazon bulls bellowing their lust out into the world; in fall, they were already leading the calves of the litter down into the valley through every gap and fissure, to their winter abodes."

Fajon fell silent. Her breath quickened. She hugged the armrests of her chair as if she wanted to lift herself up out of it and walk over to the balcony railing. But she couldn't. Never again.

Bijoiu, who had followed them like a shadow, drew nearer. As if he knew exactly what afflicted his wife, he took her by the shoulders and massaged her tight muscles. Another of her husbands stepped onto the balcony balancing a tray laden with dishes on the palm of one hand. He set it on the floor in front of Kakuta.

"Soup," he said curtly. "Superheated to kill off any bacteria or germs that could harm you. The vegetables and meat were ultrasonically treated. With it, distilled water. We hope you can tolerate our food."

Kakuta lowered his head gratefully. The Ferrons had reasoned all this out. Even if they had never come into contact with visitors from space, they had been prepared for a close encounter.

Although their disparate tribal structure feels strange to us, they're a clear step ahead in terms of societal maturity.

He ate. The heat of the thick pureed soup had a soporific and calming effect all at once. The worries of the last few hours fell away from him. For the first time since he had set foot on Ferrol, Kakuta could relax.

He breathed deeply and enjoyed the scented air. The calls of nocturnal birds. Cries of happy children that echoed from the front of the main building and the widely strewn pavilions. The additional weight that he had been carrying around with him on this alien world was suddenly no longer too heavy to bear.

"It's nice here," said Kakuta.

Then the first bomb fell.

9.

Homer G. Adams

Earth

“I can teach you to retain the Besun inside you forever,” he had said.

The Fantan reacted in a way that Adams had not expected. He landed the flounder right next to the stone building, leaped out of the small ship, and ran off. The skin flaps, which had come loose again, dragged behind him.

Adams left the small vehicle as well and watched the alien. Sheperk reached a remarkable speed that a human would never have managed. Soon he was no more than a small dot on the horizon stirring up a dust cloud behind him.

Adams stood there, hesitant. He wasn’t sure how to interpret the Fantan’s behavior. Despite all the knowledge he had amassed over the last few days, he still hadn’t managed to understand Sheperk’s mannerisms and motivations.

After a few minutes, the alien returned. He came to a stop right in front of Adams.

“What do you want for your knowledge?” he asked, now completely calm again.

Could it be true? Had the Fantan jumped on his plan, no ifs, no buts, blinded by the hope of being able to indulge in a frenzy of Besun and never again have to join the endless search for more of these special moments?

“The members of your people terrify us humans,” Adams began carefully. “You steal from us. You make us afraid. We don’t understand you. Incomprehension and fear give rise to aggression. At some point, there will be violent resistance against members of

the Fantan people. It could be that you have stronger arguments on your side—but do you really want to provoke a war?"

"That is not an answer to my question. We are brokering a new deal. Tell me what you'd like to have from me if you teach me to hold on to the moment."

Adams's heart pounded out of his chest. "I want you to leave Earth. All Fantan."

"Denied," Sheperk said quickly, as if he had expected this demand. "That is not in my people's interest, and I also cannot speak for my compatriots. Request something else."

Adams shrugged his shoulders. He had already achieved more than he had dared hope. Whatever came next was a bonus.

"We have enough of our own problems on Earth. We're in an extreme period of upheaval right now. You're disturbing us. Holding us back."

"How does that concern us?"

"You're destroying the Besun of our world."

"That is not true," Sheperk asserted. "You're doing that on your own."

"I don't understand."

"We possess enough information about the Earth to be able to say that your world is no longer in balance. Climate change is at a very advanced stage. It may be irreversible unless..."

"Yes?"

"Unless we help you."

"You could do that?"

"Yes."

Adams felt thoroughly blindsided. Sheperk had seized the upper hand in their negotiations. The Fantan had tempted him with an offer so incredible that he couldn't turn it down.

"How, though? I know that we don't hold a candle to you in any number of ways, but I can't imagine that a handful of Fantan would be capable of saving a whole planet from its downfall."

"I can prove it," Sheperk said. He shoved the human back towards the flounder and asked him to get in.

What happened next would remain a puzzle to Homer G. Adams for the rest of his life. He left the barrel-shaped ship and stepped onto the ground with rickety legs. He was still wearing the clothes from when he had set out with the Fantan.

Set out...to where? Thought came as a struggle. Too much had hailed down on him in the last few hours. Days? Had he actually left the Earth? Had he traveled to Venus with Sheperk?

He, the man with the unimpeachable memory, had largely forgotten what had happened.

"Well?" Sheperk asked, stepping out of the ship's airlock and coming up behind him. "What do you say?"

Adams was silent. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He wanted to have at least a vague grasp of the temporal flow of the events floating so nebulously through his head. "Be patient a moment," he bade the Fantan. "I have to think."

"By all means."

Adams stepped out onto the wide plain of the dried-out salt lake just a few kilometers from the outskirts of the ever-growing city of Terrania. He felt sick; his stomach snarled.

The wind carried a scent of curry. Not far from them stood a tent city, evidently inhabited by Indians. Narrow, well-trodden paths led into the mountains. The people walking along them carried pots and sacks, water and food they had gotten from one of the many distribution centers around the city.

Every so often, one of the people stopped for a curious look over at the barrel ship.

Adams turned to the right. There, in the distance, stood the Fantan's spindle-shaped mothership. He had been inside the scouter...

Hadn't he?

Remember! Adams urged himself.

Oh yes, images were coming back to him. Weak, barely recognizable reflections of what he had experienced two days earlier in Sheperk's company.

They had boarded the mothership. Gone past Fantan on guard duty, past wondrous-looking generators, enormous cargo bays, machinery, tiny cabins. Then they had come to the hangar where the auxiliary craft were stored.

Sheperk had made requests. Machines had been delivered, large and small. Adams no longer had any idea how they looked or what functions they served. Floating robots had brought all the equipment on board the auxiliary craft—*Strange how quickly you get used to the presence of mechanical helpers*—before leaving to carry out tasks elsewhere on the mothership.

Sheperk had bid him come on board. Adams couldn't have said what happened inside, how it looked, what they talked about, or what they had done. Everything was gone, and to him, that was truly shocking.

His next conscious memory was of an entirely foreign environment. Of fog plumes that reduced his range of vision to a few meters. Torn and rutted ground, dry, entirely different from anything on Earth. Everything around him had been unfamiliar. Sheperk had taken him to a different world! To Venus!

Adams tottered, struggling to keep himself on his feet. What a cruel joke! He had left Earth, taken a journey through space—and he could barely remember it!

He had worn a spacesuit that Sheperk had produced from who knows where. They had stepped outside and been surrounded by yellow-green fog. They had conversed. About a plan, a purpose whose scope Adams could neither believe nor understand.

Then it had begun. Machines had rolled out of the auxiliary craft's hatch and onto the planet's surface. They had moved around, directed by Sheperk, who had stood at the center of the activity and focused on giving orders to his mechanical helpers.

A protective shield had arisen. The gas had dissipated, sucked up and pumped out somewhere else. Visibility had become clearer. Then the liquid had come. Pumped up from the deepest depths, blended with chemicals that had bacterial nutrients mixed in.

Tears welled up in Adams's eyes. He had witnessed a miracle, the coming of life in all its vividness. In a stupor, without being able to remember even the tiniest detail. All he had left were a few vague images and the sense of awe he had felt in those hours.

Plants had sprouted from bare ground, breaking through the dry crust with the strongest power imaginable: the power of life. Spurred on by Sheperk, he had opened the helmet of his spacesuit and breathed fresh, cool air. Venusian air.

And then came the only sentences that remained lucid in his memory. "We could make this world inhabitable for you, if we wanted," Shepherd had said. "Just as easily, we could stop Earth's global warming. That is what my companions and I will give you if you teach us to hold on to the Besun forever."

Then Adams had told the truth. Still flabbergasted and enraptured by what was happening around him, he had admitted to having lied.

The movie in his mind cut off suddenly at that point, the film torn. The next thing he recalled was leaving the auxiliary craft and stepping back onto Earth again a few minutes earlier.

"How do you feel?" Sheperk asked.

“Awful. And yet…somehow relieved.”

“That comes with forgetting.” The Fantan waved his arms at the humans who were gradually approaching to marvel at the alien ship.

“I’m sorry for lying to you, Sheperk. I wanted to convince you to leave Earth.”

“Yes, you wanted me to pull one over on me. As is customary between good business partners.”

Was that humor? Fantan humor?

“You haven’t punished me. You’ve brought me back to Earth. You could have just as easily left me on Venus or killed me.”

“We are not savages.” Sheperk pranced about, turning energetically. The skin flaps had now separated from his body almost entirely. They surrounded him like thin cloths fluttering in the wind.

“But…”

“I carry my own Besun with me, Adams. It tastes, to use your own limited terminology, bitter and stale. And I have passed on a little of this bitterness to you. As a punishment for your impertinence.”

Had the Fantan hit him, hurt him, injured him? Was that why he felt so stupefied? No. He felt entirely healthy.

“You’ve forgotten things, no? I stole your memories. And for good reason.” Sheperk came to a stop. “You told me that you never forget anything in your life. It is a blessing to be able to recall every Besun you have ever experienced—and a terrible curse at the same time. Pain, fear, anger, desperation… You carry all these with you forever. You can never be free of your emotions.” Sheperk whirled like a dervish, his arms stretched wide. “You were used to handling that. You never knew anything different. But now that I have shown you what it means to forget, you will forever remember how it felt.” The Fantan stopped its rotating movements again. “And that,

human of Earth, is your punishment."

Punishment? That? It was laughable! Adams suppressed a smile. The nebulous feeling, the vagueness in his thoughts, made him horribly uncomfortable. He was happy to be whole again, to be himself again.

Wasn't he?

He somehow felt emptier than before. Robbed of his purity.

"I'm sorry that I can't help you, Sheperk," he repeated quietly.

"Oh, the Besun wouldn't have as much value if it weren't so transient. The moment would no longer be a moment." The Fantan reached to his belt and handed Adams a gleaming silver stick. "I thank you for your companionship in any case. Here."

"What is it?"

"More knowledge. Knowledge you humans will need to save your world that's coming apart at the seams."

"You're *giving* it to me? I thought we only made deals."

"Consider it a bonus payment. Earth offers so much Besun of such special quality that shouldn't go down with it. Music. Wisdom. Words. There is something in you that seems worth preserving."

"I... Thank you!" Adams didn't know what to say. He took the stick.

It wasn't what he had been hoping to achieve. The Fantan would stay for now. But he had achieved something else: he had caught these beings' attention. He had brought humanity closer to Sheperk. He had shown him the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, in many nuanced forms. Perhaps they and the Fantan would be able to come to more of an accord now?

Adams had his doubts about that. They were too alien to one another. Every word had to be weighed carefully; every poorly considered gesture could lead to misunderstandings. It would take

years to get a clear picture of Fantan body language...and by that time, he feared it would be far too late. Already the rage was boiling up in the populace, as he had seen a few days earlier in India.

If only they knew what Besun meant to the aliens! The Fantan tried to capture and preserve it, snatching away everything that reminded them of those special moments in some form. But what purpose did it serve? Why didn't they find Besun in themselves—why look for it on other worlds and in other cultures?

"Where are you going?" Adams asked as Sheperk gradually moved away from the auxiliary craft.

"I need a little peace and quiet. I have to think."

"Here? Why don't you rejoin your people on the mothership?"

"This area is something special." With an arm, he gestured towards Terrania. "Life is beginning to pulse there, and with it, the Besun swells ever greater. It does me good to take it in from a distance."

"How does Besun grow?"

"It happens by coincidence. It grows out of great and important deeds. It forms due to many small individual factors. There is no all-encompassing formula for it."

"And how do you sense it?"

"With all my senses. I see, smell, feel, hear, and taste it. It completes me. It makes me feel better, and on the other hand it makes me wish to be able to accumulate more and more of this betterness inside me."

Sheperk continued on his way into the desert, not following any of the paths.

"So that's it, then?" Adams called after him.

"What do you mean?"

“Our business is completed? We’ll never see each other again?”

“If a fortunate Besun occurs, we will encounter each other again. If not, it wasn’t meant to be.”

Adams indicated a bow. “We shared a lot of special moments together. I enjoyed my time with you.”

Sheperk came to a stop. “Why?”

“Because I learned from you. Including a few things about myself.”

“Every encounter involves interaction. Only through that can we broaden our horizons and expand our intellects. Our meeting may have occurred under special circumstances, but I don’t see the Besun in that.”

“A meeting or a conversation can also share other merits,” Adams countered. “Friendship. Or affection for one another.”

“That is of little meaning to me and my compatriots. A friendship between us can be ruled out in any case. There is too little common ground to start from.”

A vehicle was approaching. A Hummer drawing a huge trail of dust behind it. In its wake followed more cars, most of which had once belonged to the Chinese army’s supplies.

“It would be better if you went back on board,” Adams prompted. “I have an uneasy feeling.”

“I’m staying. I taste excitement. New experiences.”

Sheperk waved his arms enthusiastically. He was insatiable in his desire for more Besun. He took some wavering steps to the side and rested his body on two limbs to watch the oncoming vehicles.

Was he so sure of himself? Did he believe he was invincible—or was it Adams he had so much trust in?

So, the government of Terrania had responded. The Fantan

mothership, which had touched down several kilometers northeast of here, was under constant watch. Now they were paying attention to the auxiliary craft, which stood markedly closer to the city. No doubt Bai Jun was responsible for the quick deployment of the city's security forces. He was perfectly fulfilling his dual role as Terrania's mayor and military strategist.

The Hummer stopped around fifty meters away from the auxiliary craft; the other off-road vehicles did too. A man got out, short and balding, whom Adams knew all too well. Whom he liked, respected...and in some ways also feared.

"Allan...I had hoped you would be part of our welcome committee," Adams called out.

Allan D. Mercant. Once a high-ranking member of Homeland Security, now on Perry Rhodan's side. He guaranteed that no chaos would break out in Terrania and that supply chains would continue.

"Are you well?" the security expert asked, ignoring the greeting.

"Couldn't be better."

Armed men drew nearer. Mercant's escorts, who surrounded them and made sure their conversation could continue undisturbed. Several barrels stayed firmly aimed at Sheperk.

"We were very worried," Mercant said, linking arms with Adams and leading him out of the spacecraft's shadow. "Since Reginald Bull disappeared, nerves have been frayed in Stardust Tower." The American held on even more tightly. "At first we thought you'd been kidnapped, but then your three young...accomplices taught us better." His grip was painful now. "How could you be so stupid? You put your life on the line with this pathetic stage performance, and you didn't even tell us about it!"

"Because I knew that Bai Jun would forbid it." Adams wrenched his arm away. "You both have military training and clearly structured perspectives. I, on the other hand, wanted to approach the Fantan in a more...hmm...roundabout way."

“Did you succeed?”

“I think so, yes.” Adams pondered the question. He glanced at Sheperk, who was still keeping himself apart, as if he didn’t care what the humans had to talk about. As if they weren’t worthy of his attention. “I have no idea what to think about everything I’ve experienced in the last few days.” He stopped, putting a firm hand on Mercant’s shoulder. He turned the short man so that the latter’s striking facial features had to look towards him. “I went to Venus! I saw things you couldn’t imagine in your wildest dreams. I received information that will help us make this world a tiny bit more livable!”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you’re seeing things in a romantic light. The Fantan are giving us serious problems. They’re obtrusive and uncompromising in their search for Besun. There have been battles and deaths. Conflicts like in India that make it all but impossible for us to continue following Rhodan’s path of peace and promoting an advance into space.” Mercant took a step back and massaged his temples. He looked tired. “People around the globe are in a state of panic. They’re afraid of the unknown. It just leads to more worries. Worries that we already have enough of without all this.”

Adams reached into his pocket and rummaged around for the stick-shaped data storage medium Sheperk had given him. “I have something that might help solve one of our biggest problems. The Fantan gave it to me.”

“You came to an agreement?”

Adams shook his head. “Whenever I thought I finally understood Sheperk, he did things that seemed thoroughly abstruse. His search for Besun, for those very special moments, will forever remain a mystery to me.”

“What is that?” Mercant asked, pointing at the stick.

“Knowledge. Information about how we can combat Earth’s climate collapse.”

“You believe he’s telling the truth? What if that’s an explosive?”

“Mistrustful down to your toes, as always.”

“And you’re as naive as ever. You said yourself you know nothing about this Sheperk’s intentions. What if he’s trying to lull you into a false sense of security and is now hoping you’ll take that thing to Terrania? So it can take its effect there.”

“Fantan technology leaves us in the dust. If they wanted to, they could have bombed us off the face of the Earth already.”

“And lose all the Besun we can serve up for them on a silver platter? No! Their goal seems to be destabilizing our governments. I’m assuming they’re clever enough to recognize that Terrania is home to their most dangerous adversaries. The ones who could get humanity to band together against a common foe.”

“Your assumption is ridiculous, Mercant!” Adams was annoyed by the short man’s stubbornness. At the same time, he felt suddenly unsure. Did he actually know what made Sheperk and his kind tick? Hadn’t the last few hours and days proven the exact opposite? “Just look at him. He shows no sign of fear even though he’s surrounded by weapons. He trusts that I’ll ensure his safety.”

“Or he has ways to protect himself that we’re not yet aware of.”

Sheperk lowered himself onto his barrel-shaped body and stretched out his limbs. He made sounds that the translator didn’t interpret. The Fantan was drawing more and more attention. What was he doing? Had he found a very special Besun that eluded human senses?

All of a sudden, Adams sensed danger. There were far too many people around them. Citizens of Terrania. Those who wished they could be. People armed and unarmed, soldiers and civilians. They were all coming nearer, forming a semicircle around the alien who stood for so much they didn’t understand. The semicircle quickly became a circle. Adams and Mercant were forced aside. Shut out.

“He stinks!” someone cried.

“He’s gross!” said another.

“He and his buddies want to turn us into slaves!” a third roared.

“I heard the Fantan have invaded Japan!”

“They steal and kill children!”

Adams shoved people aside and tried to push through the crowd. He shouted loudly to draw attention, delivered strikes left and right —but he was too quiet, too small, too insignificant.

There were no individuals anymore, only a compressed mass of trampling, ranting, screaming idiots driven by their emotions, who weren’t heeding anything else. Anything.

Shots were fired—Mercant’s security staff blasting a warning into the air. Why were they standing outside of the circle? Had they willingly made space for the people? Did they somehow want this catastrophe to take its course?

“No!” Adams shouted, arms flailing wildly at those around him, forcing himself forward, wrestling with these people who had turned their backs on him, who were now looking like a compact, impassable wall. “Leave him alone! He hasn’t done anything to us!”

No one listened to him. His voice was swallowed up by the general hullabaloo. More shots rang out, and Adams didn’t know if they had come from inside the circle or from Mercant’s team.

A fist connected with him, seemingly incidentally. His lip split. A woman had punched him. A pregnant Asian woman with a visibly protruding belly. Her face was a twisted picture of hate. She hissed and spat and kicked at him, only letting up after he drew back.

Memories you’ll never forget...

He could hear Mercant’s voice, in its tone used to giving orders. But that didn’t concern Adams anymore. He stumbled to one side and wiped the blood from his lip. He had to get away from there as quickly as possible. He didn’t want to see or hear what happened. If he let it engrave itself into his memory, he’d never have a single

good thought about humanity again.

He ran out into the desert, far away, followed by sounds that reminded him of a wild animal's growling. He ran as far as his legs would take him. Eventually, he fell to the burning hot ground, pressing his hands against his ears in the fetal position. And cried.

He cried until someone found him and took him back to Terrania.

10.

Perry Rhodan

Ferrol

He drew his head in. It was sticky and cramped inside the amphibian vehicle. Ferrons pushed past him along narrow passageways without paying him any notice. The soldiers looked tired and indifferent.

Scahles, commander of the pioneer troops of the second infantry, sat in a small alcove, observing the humans. The red-tinged light revealed traces of exhaustion on her face.

“Humans, you call yourselves,” she said. “You want to help. You’d like to go to the Red Palace and speak with the Thort.” The woman shook her head, sidelocks falling over her face. “You possess remarkable abilities, as we can see in the recordings.” She gestured to Ras Tschubai, whose teleports had been captured by the Ferron soldiers’ spy cameras. “Even so, I trust neither you nor this Warani. It puzzles me that you would want to enter the besieged city of Thorta. And as for Chaktor...”

She turned to the spacefarer of her own people.

“We will confirm the details of your identity as soon as possible. However, the background check will take a little time. The space fleet was wiped out, and there’s chaos at HQ. They’re not answering our questions.”

Rhodan took a step forward. “With all due respect, Scahles, we don’t have any time! We have to get to Thort as quickly as possible. Not only because we hope to meet our companions there. We also believe—”

“I did not give you permission to speak!” Schahles barked. “Guards!”

An armed Ferron stepped up next to Rhodan. The man pushed him back into line with the others and held out a baton in front of him. This was to make Rhodan aware that he was prepared to make use of the weapon at any moment.

Menet interjected, “You do know who and what the Warani are, Commander?”

“Who doesn’t know that? Surly loners who claim not to care about matters concerning other Ferrons. In other words, unpleasant freeloaders who aren’t willing to contribute for the good of the people.”

Menet took these insults without batting an eye. “But you also know that we place our sense of honor above all else?”

“That is well-known.”

“Then as a Warani of the Bixao clan, I swear on the lives of my relatives and of all members of the tribe that these humans are telling the truth. Their bodies may be weak, but they are brave, strong of will, and have proven themselves loyal comrades in arms. I would give my life for one of theirs.”

Rhodan sucked in air between his teeth. The sullen man from the swamp was saying things he’d never have expected!

Scahles looked at the Warani. She licked her narrow lips with her tongue and interlaced her fingers, then drew circles and other symbols on the sheet lying in front of her. “The Warani always tells the truth, so it goes in Thorta. No matter how uncomfortable it may sound.”

“It is so.” Menet stood in a proud stance. “Lies, intrigues, greed, falsehood, vanity... These are all mistaken achievements of your so-called civilization. We have forsworn these things. Do you believe what I am saying, Commander?”

“We live in strange times, Warani. A Ferron can tell the truth and yet cause greater damage with it than if he had lied.”

“You’re evading the question, Scahles. Again, do you believe

me?”

Annoyed, the woman threw her writing implement aside. “Yes, dammit, I do!” She signaled for the guards to leave the same room. Very visibly, she laid her duty pistol on the writing desk in front of her before sitting and waving for the Terrans to come closer.

“Thank you for your trust, Commander.” Rhodan sat down on one of the overly small and narrow chairs.

“Thank the Warani. You are free to do as you wish.”

“You know what we need, Scahles.”

“Are you somehow expecting that I’ll help you get to the Red Palace?” The woman bent her head all the way back and yelled with laughter. “We’re about to do the very opposite and lure the Topsidans to the outskirts.”

“Why?” Alexander Baturin asked. He bent forward with great curiosity as the Ferron commander spread out a map in front of her.

“To use all the advantages we have left. Above all, knowledge of the terrain. We also wish to split up and thin out the enemy troops as much as possible. Death by a thousand cuts.”

“Guerilla tactics,” Chaktor said. “Already?”

“What do you know of the current state of affairs?”

“Essentially nothing,” Rhodan said, taking over again. “We tried to stop the Topsidans’ advance in space, as Chaktor will confirm. With a ship more technologically advanced than theirs.”

Scahles eyes held a glint all of a sudden. “You have spacecraft that could help us drive back the lizards?”

“I’m afraid not. But we have some other tricks up our sleeve,” Rhodan improvised. He was dependent on the officer’s help. He needed a carrot to dangle. At least a small one.

The hope in Scahles’s gaze disappeared as quickly as it had

appeared. The woman had no doubt experienced far too many disappointments over the last few days. Deep sentiments no longer had a place in the fight for survival.

"The Topsidans have destroyed the local space fleet entirely," she continued dispassionately. "They have also shot down the orbital defense forts, broken all resistance on the space stations, destroyed energy-generating solar cities in space, and even disabled the planet-side air force. The losses of both lives and infrastructure are enormous." The commander struggled for words now. She cast another glance at Menet, who had remained standing, impassive like a statue with his arms folded in front of his chest. "I'm telling you things that are subject to the strictest confidentiality, you must be aware. Things that would destroy my people's morale if they knew about them."

"It's that bad, then?" Chaktor shook his head.

"Far worse. We can hardly do a thing to oppose the Topsidans' superior forces. They suffocate all resistance before it takes root and they take prisoners. Our defensive doctrine is always based on the assumption that a complete conquest of the entire planet is impossible. There are too many uncertainties for the assailant, after all, and it would take tremendous resources to carry out a plan like that. But we were wrong."

Scahles reached for a kind of tobacco pipe with two mouthpieces, stuffed bright red leaves into the oval head, and sprayed water over it. A bittersweet aroma filled the room. The commander drew from the mouthpieces' narrow slits and breathed in deeply.

"The lizards' technological advantage is too great. Also, their enemy soldiers have no regard for life, while we had to show concern for Ferron civilians in everything we did."

"*Had* to? Not have to?" Rhodan asked.

"That's correct." Nauseated, Scahles slid the pipe away from herself. "In the last few hours, we've transitioned to disregarding our own precepts."

She opened a drawer in her desk, fished out an X-shaped data storage device, inserted it into a reader, and activated it.

Scenes were projected onto the opposite wall. Video footage that Rhodan would rather not have seen. They showed other Ferron amphibian vehicles lying in wait on the bed of a Wouffar. The keels of several refugee boats sailed past above them, countless bubbles in their wakes. Suddenly, the amphibian vehicles sprung into action. They shot up, rising out of the water and splashing against the bodies of the Topsidans wading through the water. Shots fired from every one of the vehicle's holes, killing lizards with no regard for their own people.

"We're using the refugees as bait," Scahles said without looking at the footage. "We're sacrificing hundreds of them to wipe out a handful of Topsidans."

Rhodan had tears in his eyes. He could hardly believe what he was seeing. The Ferron soldiers were shooting at their own people. Showing no mercy.

"Why?" he asked, then repeated it. "Why?"

"The calculation is simple: the Topsidans have invaded our system with several hundred spacecraft. Five hundred thousand soldiers, maybe a little more, maybe a little less, are trying to conquer the settled planets and moons of the Vega system. Every dead enemy makes the lizards' purpose more difficult, especially since the resupply of fighters and resources always leads to significant delays. Even if their spacefaring abilities are far superior to ours, the journey here from their home must involve immense costs."

"This is crazy!" Chaktor shouted. "It must end at once!"

"War *is* crazy," Schales remarked succinctly.

"You're content with massacres like this?" Rhodan pointed at the images. They never seemed to end. They burned themselves into his memory with their intensity.

“Do you know what it means to have no other alternative?” Scahles asked him in return. “This is the only practical way to prevent total defeat.”

“Have you thought about surrendering?”

“You call that an alternative?” The commander reached for her pipe and emptied more liquid into the head. “As far as we have seen, the prisoners are immediately transferred to prison camps. There, they are kept as slaves. Rumor has it they are transported away somewhere. Maybe sold, maybe to provide amusement on an alien world.”

“Do you have proof for those claims?”

Scahles slammed a palm onto the table. “Are you suggesting that I should wait until I have all the facts laid out on the table in black and white while millions of Ferrons are carted away?”

Rhodan refrained from replying. The woman was clearly out of patience—and out of energy. She functioned as a soldier, but that was all.

“What about the Thort?” Chaktor asked.

“What about him?” Scahles shot back, still aggressive. “He’s supposedly in the Red Palace and is, by all appearances, still alive. Are you expecting miracles from him? Maybe you believe in the fairy-tale about a secret weapon that will help in a time of crisis?” She waved a dismissive hand. “That old wives’ tale makes just as little sense as all the stories of the Lightbringers. For the military, facts are what count. Evidence.”

Rhodan kept himself restrained, and Chaktor fell equally silent. The soldier was no doubt aware of her ambivalent behavior. She claimed not to believe in myths and yet treated the humans with a respect that couldn’t be reconciled with military logic. To her, Rhodan and the other members of the small party were a tiny glimmer of light in the darkness. A possibility that she clung to in her desperation and fear for the fate of the Ferron people.

“All we need is one amphibian vehicle,” Rhodan implored her, “and a crew of volunteers willing to take us to Thorta.”

“One amphibian vehicle could make all the difference in our next ambush.”

“And we might make all the difference in the fight for your home,” Rhodan said, putting on a self-confident face.

“You’re rather full of yourself, human.”

“I have a strong interest in bringing this war to an end as quickly as possible. I want to survive, like all of you—and I want to get back to my home planet.”

Scahles turned to Menet, the man from the swamp. The Warani ignored her, acting as if the conversation had nothing to do with him.

“One small craft. Capable of water travel. Four-man crew. You’ll have to recruit the volunteers yourself. That’s all I can offer you.”

“Only four?” Chaktor asked. “To my knowledge, the minimum crew size is five.”

“Correct.” Scahles drew on her pipe. “I’m the fifth volunteer. I have just reported for duty.”

A commander in charge of more than five hundred soldiers had no right to abandon her post and involve herself in a breakneck adventure. The woman had to have compelling reasons for her choice.

She’s running away, Rhodan realized. *She’ll hand things over to her second-in-command, a stickler for rules who will follow orders without thinking, continuing to hunt the Topsidans without considering the consequences. Scahles, meanwhile, can no longer square the ridiculous orders she’s been given with her conscience. They’ll probably strip her of her command and put in front of a military tribunal. But that seems to be the lesser evil in her eyes.*

The volunteers were found quickly. Many of the soldiers had

families in Thorta, so it took them back to their home turf. Also, Chaktor got to work seeding rumors about the Lightbringers who would save the people of Ferron in a time of great need, and word spread lightning fast.

The rest of the troop departed without much fanfare. Scahles placed no stock in grand scenes, and in no time the amphibian vehicle was trundling through the mud on the bed of the waterway. Through a jungle of algae, past mysterious plants reminiscent of mushrooms, a swarm of fish with rudimentary legs running ahead of them at ground level. For half an hour, they followed the flow of the Wouffar. Then Scahles, who had taken on the role of pilot, steered the vehicle towards one of the banks, pointing them at a walled surface clad with lichen.

Just as Rhodan was expecting them to collide with the stone, the illusion vanished to reveal a tunnel leading into complete darkness. Even the light from the strong headlights—which Scahles now activated—only reached a few meters. There was barely a fish or plant to be seen. Everything seemed strangely dead.

“You’ll find light machine guns in the weapons locker. They can be activated as soon as you have left the vehicle. Until then, they’re blocked by a magnetic impulse.”

Was this a special security measure targeted at them, or did it apply in general?

Rhodan took one of the weapons. It was as light in his hand as a toy, yet it felt robust. A soldier showed him how the sights and the single-shot automation worked, instructed him about muzzle speed and lead times. About the small computer unit that controlled against unsteadiness, breathing, and trembling fingers. About the firing speed in continuous operation, about the projectiles and the shockwaves they generated in the tissue when they penetrated flesh...

Rhodan let the explanation wash over him with a mixture of repulsion and fascination. Ferron weapons tech was a step ahead of Earth’s, that was for sure.

I'd rather have learned other things from them.

Keeping the weapon, he turned to face the pilot again. The darkness was just giving way to a faint shimmer of light.

"These passages are part of a branching system connected to the energy production industry in the wetlands of Derwash," Scahles said, though no further clarifications followed.

The roughly fifteen-meter-long vehicle ascended a steep ramp. Its front half floated into the air for a brief moment, then crashed back onto the concrete surface with little in the way of shock absorption. The passengers on board were all shaken hard.

Scahles appeared unruffled. "Over the last two days, we've constantly moved through these tunnels and ambushed the Topsidans wherever we could. Our knowledge of the tunnel network is quite sufficient."

She turned left, past a maze of giant pipes that all led vertically into the depths. Steam hung in the air in places. A single unarmed Ferron stood beside a switchboard and waved behind their vehicle uncertainly.

"If all goes well, we can use this system to reach the periphery of the city and avoid the biggest dangers. That is assuming the lizards haven't found a way in yet."

Scahles didn't sound overly convinced, and for good reason. It seemed improbable that the conquerors had so far made no efforts to penetrate the subterranean areas surrounding Thorta, especially as the Ferrons clearly hadn't kept these paths entirely secret.

One soldier was busy with detection devices, another with weapons systems. A pair of short twin tubes attached to the flat vehicle's roof were continually swinging left and right and back again. The other two soldiers were handling the craft's internal processes. They were constantly moving, creating a commotion in the back of the vehicle all on their own. Chaktor, Menet, and Rhodan's human companions had taken a seat on the narrow benches running along the sides.

Left again, down another steep ramp, across a subterranean riverbed with a current that almost carried the vehicle away with it. Then along a natural, unhewn tunnel and through a cave with thousands of gypsiferous stalactites hanging from the ceilings. Several creatures not unlike tapirs crossed their path. Their eyes shone brightly as they hissed aggressively at the vehicle.

Onwards. For hours. New impressions, new sights. Sights that offered extraordinary perspectives but were completely exhausting. Everything here—life forms, colors, spaces, views—was so new and unfamiliar that it strained Rhodan's perception.

"Three more hours," said Scahles. "Then we'll have reached the Lemias Wouffar. That will let us advance as close to the city as possible."

The static from the com unit was now occasionally interrupted by words. The Ferron commander shook her head, sad and desperate. Clearly, the reports she received were not good news.

Still farther. Through a brightly lit area. Side alcoves held interesting-looking items. There might have been an untold number of cultural artifacts there. Silent witnesses of Ferron history that had been brought to safety.

The commander kept her gaze fixed firmly forward, as if she didn't want to see what was stashed away around them under any circumstances.

The vehicle stopped at the end of the lit-up area. Two soldiers got out, their weapons at the ready, and worked the electronic unlocking system of a giant gate. They were nervous, as if they feared encountering Topsidans on the other side.

Nothing happened once the two halves of the gate moved apart. Scahles breathed a huge sigh of relief, and the two soldiers slipped into the vehicle, which jerked back into motion. They both spat before getting in.

Phosphorescent walls. Fermentation gases that stank almost unbearably despite their vehicle's filtration systems. Silt that

dripped from the ceiling. More unknown representatives of the local fauna, these akin to rats. They seemed to rule this roost, pouncing on the vehicle in large packs.

Rhodan ate and drank, taking more food to store in his pockets as well. The sweat on his brow piqued the Ferron soldiers' interest. Their temperature regulation worked differently from that of humans; they spat out their sweat.

Alexander Baturin looked extremely nervous, while Wuriu Sengu was dozing, his eyes closed. Ras Tschubai was going over the functions of his weapon for the nth time. Chaktor and Menet sat in silence, as if they had nothing to say to one another.

The quiet wore on Rhodan's nerves as time passed agonizingly slowly. He longed to return to the surface. He longed for *decisions*.

Scahles waved him over again. "I'll give you the names and addresses of contacts who might help you get inside the Red Palace," she said without looking at him.

"You don't plan on going with us?"

"We have no idea what's waiting for us in the city. I'm expecting chaotic conditions and altercations. We could get separated."

Rhodan listened as she spoke. She gave him so much information that it was hard to take it all in. Some he wrote down, while other parts he learned by heart.

"Get a little rest," she told him finally. "You'll need your strength. We still have at least another two hours to go. The area up ahead is safe. We've already passed through the most precarious junctions in the network." The experienced soldier was right, no doubt.

"Good to hear," Rhodan said curtly before withdrawing to the rear of the vehicle again, where his friends were. He squeezed in between them, leaned his head against a hard padded neck rest, and immediately fell asleep.

One of the sullen-eyed Ferron soldiers woke him up. “We’re almost there!” he said. “Get ready.”

They all leaped to their feet at once, checking their equipment one last time and familiarizing themselves with the idea that the next few minutes of their lives could be the last.

Rhodan stepped up behind Scahles. “Is there any indication of what’s waiting for us?”

“The com transmissions I was able to pick up didn’t sound overly promising,” she replied evasively. “We’ll set you down in Parifan, a relatively minor port suburb on Thorta’s eastern outskirts. Topsidian units are rarely seen there, in my experience. Liaison officers from the army will bring you closer to the Red Palace.”

“And you?”

“We’ll turn the vehicle around after unloading you and dock at the opposite pier to set off a little fireworks display. We have a few smoke bombs on board, not to mention heavy weaponry. As soon as we’ve stalled the Topsidans long enough, we’ll disappear through the pressure outlet”—she pointed at a tube wide enough to fit a person; its purpose had thus far been unclear to Rhodan—“and follow you. The weapon systems are already programmed. They’ll continue to work independently until the vehicle is destroyed.”

“Sounds good,” Rhodan replied. He had his doubts about the plan but knew far too little about the local landscape and the situation on the ground for it to be worth arguing with the commander.

“Get yourselves ready. Memorize the plans we’ve made.”

Scahles handed him several pieces of paper. Rhodan called his companions over, and they attentively studied the pictorial reference materials for the suburb of Parifan. Tall, densely packed buildings crowded around the harbor with a total of seven piers. The streets looked narrow and somber; the only activity was on the piers and the adjoining container reloading sites.

“We’re here,” Scahles said after a while. She pointed to several screens that were now switched on. They showed cloudy water with dark streaks running through it. At a depth of around fifteen meters, they were moving towards the front of the pier, which was visible only as a hazy black wall.

The Ferron commander steered around several algae-covered wooden planks, crossing the water in a zigzag course. Buoys were anchored to concrete blocks on the bed with thin steel cables. Here and there, the vehicle’s rollers scraped over refuse that had been thoughtlessly discarded in the water.

Something slammed against their vehicle. Everyone gave a start —only to jump in fright even more strongly when a corpse came into view on one of the external cameras. The Ferron floated away, then came back again, swept back and forth by the soft beating of the waves. The dead soldier’s legs had gotten tangled in some rope.

“One minute left,” Scahles said hoarsely, not sparing a word for the body. “Go into the airlock. Good luck.”

“See you soon, Commander.”

“Yes. See you soon.”

Their party of six squeezed into a tiny space intended to fit three under normal circumstances. Water gurgled below the floor panel, and the amphibian vehicle listed barely perceptibly to the right. The cool water quickly reached to their thighs, then their chests. Rhodan’s clothes clung tightly to his body and felt heavy.

“Hold your breath!” he heard himself say. He blew up his cheeks and the water rose above his head. The external airlock hatch opened, and they floated out like a huge wriggling lump.

He separated himself from the others, blinked, and looked up. In front of him were the lowest rungs of a ladder. Rhodan grasped them and indicated for his companions to follow his lead. They quickly ascended the three or four meters to the surface through a viscous broth that felt entirely different from the water of Earth’s oceans.

Made it! Rhodan stuck his head up out of the water, breathed out, and drew fresh oxygen into his lungs. As quickly as he could, he climbed up farther to make space for the others. Tschubai, Baturin, and Sengu were below him, with the two Ferrons forming the rear of their small group.

Some surrounding planks offered a modicum of cover. Small ships were floating behind and in front of them, swaying in the soft waves of the harbor bay. Above them, at the top of the roughly five-meter-tall ladder, they could hear a Topsidan croaking. Shots echoed from some distance away.

Their location was anything but safe. They were hanging on the ladder, hardly covered at all. All the Topsidan above needed was an urge to spit into the water and he'd inevitably discover them. Then it would be open season.

Should Tschubai spring into action and take them away from one after another? No. They couldn't play their trump cards too soon. Not under any circumstances.

"Wuriu?" Rhodan asked quietly. "Can you locate Scahles?"

"She's just bringing the ship about on the other side," the Japanese man replied, also whispering. "The vehicle is about to surface. About ten more seconds."

Rhodan counted in his mind. On eleven, the metal colossus appeared, nose-first, splashing against the water's surface and making waves. The twin tubes were turned to face the end of the harbor bay and the warehouses there. The shots were accompanied by meter-long jets of flame. Then came deafening thunder and explosions on the pier. Two Topsidans who had been standing guard disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

11.

Tako Kakuta

Ferrol

One of the outbuildings vanished with a tremendous crash. Kakuta was knocked off his feet. He braced himself against the frame of the balcony door. Fajon rolled over him, then flew out of her chair and on top of him. Every item possible was flung through the air. Branches, leaves, rocks, shards of glass and metal, a bar that might have been part of a prosthetic leg.

Three small cylindrical spacecraft with spherical bulges on one side descended from the clouds and onto the lawn in front of the clinic, soon concealed again by dust clouds. He could just make out the Topsidans as they charged out of their ships, weapons at the ready, and made a beeline for the main building.

Mosaic stones sprung out of their mounting and shot in all directions. An energy beam cut a wide swathe above the balcony, coming close to tearing the whole construction down—and with it, all those seeking rest and contemplation here.

Whoever could manage it fled into the building, to presumed safety. One Ferron stayed behind. She lay there in a strangely contorted posture. The energy beam had grazed her, vaporizing a portion of her skull.

Fajon's husbands made sure the stampede of fleeing people moved in something resembling an orderly fashion. Morozova and Nyssen helped them as best they could. Bijoiu was ready to come to Fajon's aid, but Kakuta indicated that he would take care of the wheelchair-bound woman. Bijoiu only hesitated briefly before resuming his prior task.

"I'll do it...myself!" Fajon grunted, turning her chair upright again.

Kakuta ignored her. He helped her onto the seat and maneuvered it over and around the rocks, soil, and other debris scattered around and into the dubious safety of the building. At Fajon's instructions, they went down the ramp, which served her rollers well.

A Topsidan appeared at the entrance, then another. They roared, giving orders that the translation device captured fragments of.

"They want to round us all up and take us prisoner!" Kakuta shouted into Fajon's ear above the cacophony surrounding them.

She remained silent. She was overwhelmed, just like the staff, doctors, visitors, and patients who were running around like headless chickens. Who would've expected the Topsidans to have a facility like this in their sights?

"I'm getting us out of here!" Kakuta said. "No way am I letting the lizards get their hands on you, your husbands, or us. We just need to flee into the woods."

"Out of the question!" Fajon said with an energetic wave of the hand. "We're staying here. We have to help the patients. The weak and the wounded. Your friend won't survive an escape anyway."

Deringhouse. Fajon was right. He had forgotten about the former astronaut and focused on the more obvious duties.

A lone, burly Ferron came charging out of a narrow corridor. He held a kind of shotgun in his hand, which he fired in quick succession at the Topsidans as they rushed into the building in ever-growing numbers. The man hit one of them in the shoulder and another in the knee joint. Every other shot missed or was caught by the "armor" the lizard beings wore in place of combat equipment.

Three more battle-ready Ferrons stormed over. They engaged the enemy with courage borne from desperation, charging at them with kitchen knives, using rocks or medical tools.

You fools! Kakuta wanted to cry. *You'll only make things worse!*

And it *did* get worse. The Topsidans warded off their opponents effortlessly. They were well trained infantrymen, perfectly

coordinated and experienced in battle. They killed without a second thought, with their beamers, mechanical firearms, forearm-length knives, or even their bare hands. It took no more than a few seconds before the armed Ferrons all lay dead on the floor.

"Left, then to the end of the hallway," Fajon indicated quietly to Kakuta, as if she hadn't sensed her compatriots' sad fates. "The operating room is there. Beyond that is the healing house's wing for difficult cases. We have to prioritize taking care of them. Protecting them."

And how exactly are we supposed to protect them? What can we hope to achieve against these lizards? They'll chew us up and spit us out.

He pushed the woman's wheelchair on towards the OR. Behind him, he could hear Morozova and Nyssen panting. Their footsteps were easily audible over those of the light-footed Ferrons.

Fighting was going on elsewhere too. Maybe one of the more difficult patients in the building's entrance hall had lost their nerve and dragged the other Ferrons into an altercation with them. Kakuta saw more locals engaging the invaders through the closely spaced windows that lined the corridor.

They reached the OR.

"No entry," Fajon said, pointing at a yellow warning light. "Hom-aut is treating your friend right now."

The Masterbreaker no doubt knew what was going on outside of the OR by now, but he continued his work. Likely, he was adhering to the same kind of binding medical oath that applied on Earth.

Fajon wrestled with her indecision, shuffling anxiously back and forth in the wheelchair. Then she decided. "We're going in. We need Hom-aut. He's the only one who can ensure calm and prevent further bloodshed. The residents of the healing house trust him."

And Deringhouse? he wanted to ask. *What about him? What if he dies in the meantime?*

He soon thought better of it. Under the circumstances, the fate of

one individual didn't matter anymore. If there was really a possibility of bringing a halt to the Ferrons' impromptu combat efforts, Deringhouse's death would be a small price to pay.

Fajon pressed repeatedly against a sensor switch, disregarding the glowing alarm signal. With seeming reluctance, the double doors slid apart to reveal a room that wouldn't have looked the slightest bit out of place in a hospital on Earth.

"Hom-aut, we need you!" Fajon called to the Masterbreaker, who was covered in a kind of glossy transparent film, as were all those present.

"Get out at once!" the short Ferron shouted back without looking up. "I'll deal with everything else in ten minutes." He was bent over Conrad Deringhouse. Over his throat. To his left, images were being projected onto the wall, showing a greatly enlarged view of the pilot's wound.

Kakuta took a quick look around. Anne Sloane was lying on the nearest hospital bed, her eyes closed. The corners of her mouth twitched as if the telekinetic woman were in great pain.

"We don't have ten minutes, Hom-aut," he explained. "The Topsidans—"

"I am neither stupid nor hard of hearing! I know what's happening in the clinic. But this life needs to be saved. Without this operation—"

This time it was Fajon who interrupted the Masterbreaker. "Other lives need to be saved as well! The Topsidans kill everyone who comes close enough to their weapons. You have to stop, Hom-aut. Right now!"

The Masterbreaker finally lifted his head. He wore thick lenses in front of his eyes, which greatly enlarged his pupils and made him blink myopically. Suddenly, his shoulders sank. His hands began to tremble, and he raised them, horrified, before he could do irreparable damage to his patient's carotid artery. The other doctors around the human moved closer together. They still looked just as

focused as Hom-aut had been until a moment ago, not letting themselves be distracted by the argument. They kept Deringhouse alive.

"I... You're right, Fajon. I will—"

A Topsidan burst into the room. He shoved Rod Nyssen aside, knocked Fajon's chair over, delivered a ringing backhand to Kakuta, then turned in a circle several times. Lurking, waiting for just one single Ferron to dare put up resistance. His left hand rested on the trigger of a short-barreled beamer, while his muscular tail drummed against the floor.

"No! Don't shoot!" Hom-aut cried, raising both hands into the air in a gesture that couldn't be misunderstood. "We won't resist!"

More Topsidans stormed through the hallway to the OR. They secured the room, exchanged a few hissed words, and brandished their weapons threateningly.

Kakuta got up, ready to teleport at any moment, to flee from these hideous figures. Who should he take with him? Who *could* he take with him? Anne was strong; she seemed to bear the strain of the heavy gravity well. But she was also difficult, always casting doubt on his decisions. Maybe Darya Morozova, who seemed so vulnerable, and whom he felt a strange sympathy for even though he'd hardly exchanged a word with her? Or Nyssen, who had an unshakable friendship with Deringhouse and felt bound to him like a brother?

A Ferron who had just been bent over Deringhouse while handling spreaders carefully set his tool aside and walked towards the nearest Topsidan.

"Don't!" Hom-aut wanted. "Don't get too close to him, Radisker."

"Don't worry, Masterbreaker, I—"

The Topsidan fired. He shot the Ferron in his right leg. The flesh disintegrated, and an ugly stench of burning filled the room.

Another Ferron screamed in terror. She rushed towards Radisker

as he collapsed—and was hit by another beam blast right in the chest. She fell immediately, dead before she touched the floor.

"Nobody move!" Kakuta's translator conveyed. "I'll kill you all at the first sign of resistance."

The Topsidan's teeth rattled loudly against each other; his comrades chimed in with a nasty sound that rang with greed and desire. The lizards were just waiting for their chance to enact another massacre.

Kakuta had seen enough. He had to get away. He'd decided on Sloane. One short jump over to her, then onwards to the neighboring woods, as far away as possible. The element of surprise might give them a chance.

Another Topsidan entered the room. He looked different from his companions, and not only because of the gleaming red eyepatch covering his left eye. This one radiated authority—and he was unarmed.

"What is going on here?" he demanded of the Topsidan who had fired his weapon.

"I was provoked," the lizard said. "Glory to you, Wise One!"

"The tiniest armpit fart is enough to provoke you, Chach-Anem." The leader's voice sounded disconcertingly loud. "Why did you open fire? I don't see a single armed Ferron in the room!"

"This one"—he pointed at the heavily wounded Radisker—"was holding a tool in his hand that he could have used as a weapon."

"And the dead woman?"

"She was trying to charge at me. I was defending myself."

The Topsidan with the eyepatch fell silent. For several long seconds, nothing and no one stirred in the OR. Even Radisker's groaning subsided. The Ferron's circulation was on the verge of collapse.

“You’ve exceeded your jurisdiction, Chach-Anem,” the commander said. “You’ve disregarded the Third Clause of the Social Directive in a punishable manner. You do remember it, don’t you? You were taught it in the nesting house. *Respect life! Preserve it where you can. Only destroy it where it is unavoidable.*”

“I always hold to the Eleven Directives, Wise One!”

“Liar!” the other roared. “You rushed ahead with your pals, *looking* for conflict. You killed everyone in sight of your beamer’s barrel. This is a medical compound! Apart from the guards at the entrance, no one here could have posed a danger to us!”

“I felt threatened...”

“Not another word! Get out of my sight!”

The infantryman hesitated. Was he refusing to obey his commander? Or was the Topsidan with the eyepatch not his superior officer at all, only a kind of advisor?

Chach-Anem’s teeth chattered loudly, again as if in suppressed anger. His companions stayed quiet, holding their tails close to their bodies.

Like beaten dogs, Kakuta thought.

The officer with the title of “Wise One” turned to face Hom-aut. “Are you in charge here, Ferron?”

“Y... Yes.”

“I see that you are at work. I regret the death of your colleague. She is female, yes? Finish the operation and take care of this injured man and the other unfortunate, lamentable wounded. I will allow you and your doctors sufficient time and means to treat them.” The Wise One clutched at a bag he wore close to his body, then the eyepatch, and then whipped his tail against the ground three times.

“That is very generous, Wise One.”

“When the work is finished, you will be treated as prisoners

according to the Council Directives. You will receive no additional concessions from me. So use the leeway I am giving you now as best you can. Do you understand?"

Hom-aut indicated a bow. "I understand, Wise One."

The Topsidan with the eyepatch awkwardly returned the gesture, then said, "I am ashamed of Chach-Anem, that scum of his brood. I regret every waste of life."

He turned around. For a moment, his gaze rested on Kakuta, who was taller than the Ferrons and had a different skin color. The Wise One looked like he was about to say something, but then he turned away as two of his fellow Topsidans approached and quietly spoke to him. Clearly, their authority figure was needed elsewhere in this expansive compound.

The lizards withdrew, though a few stood guard in front of the OR. The Ferrons emerged from their daze. Two of them grabbed Radisker and rested him on a gurney that was quickly brought over. Their hands were still trembling a little, but as they went on, they calmed down. They were working. As doctors. As preservers of life.

Hom-aut turned to Kakuta. He spat into a nearby bowl. "I'll make sure your friend pulls through," he said. "I promise you that."

He devoted himself to his work again. To his patient. With steady hands, he finished operating on Deringhouse as if nothing had happened.

Meanwhile, Kakuta righted Fajon's wheelchair and tended to the wounds of the Ferron with the big, brave heart.

Now, what about my thoughts of escape? he mused and immediately answered his own question. *I'm staying here. I owe it to my people and to these Ferrons who have taken us into their care. Who want to save Deringhouse at all costs. Who treat us humans better than we do each other.*

Kakuta lowered his head and started getting used to the idea that he was going to be taken prisoner.

12.

Homer G. Adams

Earth

After a greater deal of effort, the content of the Fantan data storage device was translated. Mercant handed it over to the finance magnates at their next in-person meeting, which was frosty and impersonal.

In addition to the key information, it held a personal message for Adams from Sheperk. It took some time before he summoned the courage to read it.

Humans are odd, the text read. *You are in conflict with yourselves. You create so much that is so beautiful and appreciate it for a while only to cast it aside a moment later, or even destroy it. You respect life and yet destroy it—destroying yourselves in the process.*

Perhaps the notes I have provided about climate control will help you to buy a little more time. Enough that you can learn to understand your own Besun and recognize your destiny.

Adams, your company has enriched my last days. I wish I'd had more time. This was not granted to me, however. I was ill. Incurably ill. A Besun of the negative kind had contaminated my body with radiation, sentencing me to a slow, sometimes painful death. If my plan has worked, the pain of the last difficult hours was taken away from me.

You don't understand me? You wish to know why I delivered myself to the humans, defenselessly inviting their hatred and letting myself be killed? There is nothing to explain. We are how we are. We live for the search, and I have found more than I had ever thought possible. Maybe even the last few moments of my life were full of Besun. I wished for that very much.

Maybe one day you'll remember our experience on Venus; maybe not. I hope for you to retain that gap for the rest of your life. One

doesn't have to know everything...

13.

Perry Rhodan

Ferrol

The sky was full of debris, of wood and rocks and synthetic materials. A moment of unexpected calm followed. The world of Ferrol seemed to hold its breath just for an instant before giving way to chaos that strained his nerves and senses beyond all measure.

Less than five meters from Rhodan, a wooden beam half a man's height slammed against the pier, bouncing past and splashing into the water right beside him.

"Now!" he cried. He climbed up the rungs, fighting back his fear.

The Topsidan had left. With long strides, the lizard was rushing along the narrow path to the site of the explosion. He spoke into his com unit, no doubt calling for backup. More of his comrades came streaming out of alleys and streets towards the amphibian vehicle. They opened fire with beam weapons. The fire control officer on board the vehicle reacted quickly and purposefully. He killed two of his enemies with the heavy machine weapons before another burst of fire shot out of the twin tubes and a warehouse went up in flames.

"We have to get away!" Rhodan shouted. "Quickly!" He pointed towards a jetty that led away from the harbor between two adjacent buildings that were spaced narrowly apart. It was dark and barely visible—and it led in roughly the direction Scahles had specified for the meeting with an initial contact person.

Rhodan reached the corner of the first building and slid into the shadows. He wheezed, surprised again by Ferrol's gravity.

Baturin grabbed him firmly by the shoulder. "We have to wait for Scahles."

"No," Menet disagreed. "She won't come."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Baturin looked at him, wide-eyed.

"She's a soldier, filled with pride and a sense of responsibility. She set herself this task in the knowledge that she would die. Now, onward! We'll dishonor her if we don't do everything we can to escape and get to the Red Palace."

"You're lying!" Baturin shouted. "She was wrong about you, Warani! You're a man without honor. You'd run away while she's fighting for her life."

"So this is one of your Lightbringers," Menet remarked to Chaktor. "He insults me. He casts doubt on my credibility."

"He doesn't mean it that way," Rhodan said to the Swamp Ferron. He glanced behind him. Shooting and fighting was still going on in the harbor basin. "Are you certain that Scahles won't follow us?"

"You must learn to understand the fine nuances of our language, Perry Rhodan. She let you know what she intended."

And the translator wasn't capable of picking up on those nuances. It just…translated. I'd never have let her go through with this self-sacrifice. Never!

A tremendous explosion rocked the ground beneath their feet. Boards came loose from the jetty to reveal dark, wet soil below. Deep cracks formed in the brickwork of the buildings on both sides. The plaster crumbled above them. They had to get away, and fast, if they didn't want to be crushed by falling rubble.

"Scahles chose her own path," he said to Alexander Baturin with a heavy heart, clapping the Russian gently on the shoulder. "Come on now."

"Let go of me, Rhodan!" Baturin shook him off and turned to face him. "You're a phoney and a loudmouth! It's your fault that we ended up in this shit! Humans and Ferrons are dying thanks to you!

Now, to top it all off, you want to run away, you coward?" The Russian took a swing. His punch missed Rhodan and he fell to the ground, rolled with some difficulty, and tried to go for him again.

There was a loud crunch. A chunk of brickwork plummeted to the ground between them and punched a head-sized hole in the jetty.

"We have to get out of here!" Chaktor cried, protecting his face from the hail of tiny stones and shards. "If we don't leave right now, Scahles's sacrifice will have been for nothing!"

"You're going without me!" Baturin turned around and staggered back towards the pier, his weapon drawn in front of his chest, ready for combat. "You're a failure, Rhodan! You'll never manage to achieve your goals!" He disappeared into a wall of dust and fog.

"Ras, bring him back."

"I can't see him anymore, Perry. I'd have to jump blind."

Rhodan felt himself being pushed. He landed hard on the seat of his pants. Where he had just been standing, a window frame, surrounding brickwork and all, had bored its way into the wood. Chaktor kept hold of him and shoved him away from the collapsing buildings, away from the pier, deeper into the darkness.

Ras Tschubai followed with broad, powerful strides; Wuriu Sengu hurried behind them. They fled from the rain of rubble and shards that tore bloodily at their exposed skin. Away from the chaos, towards the dubious safety of a city where the fate of the Ferron people would be decided.

Their group had been split up. Morozova, Sloane, Kakuta, Deringhouse, and Nyssen might also be on their way to the Red Palace, assuming they had survived the *Good Hope*'s crash. Baturin, the cosmonaut who was always second-guessing his role, had absented himself of his own free will.

"We've made it through, Lightbringer!" said Chaktor, letting him go and wiping the dust from his clothes. He bared his teeth and

acted as though the events hadn't impacted him any further. "We've almost done it. It's not much farther now to the Red Palace."

Everything you do, Rhodan told himself, *has a direct impact on your environment. In your chosen role, you'll never again be free of the burden of that responsibility.*

"Menet stayed with Baturin," Tschubai said quietly. "He must have felt it his duty to protect him."

"I know." *We'll never find out what the Swamp Ferron wanted with the Thort.*

Rhodan looked towards the smoke clouds that hung over the city of Thorta. Small Topsidian scouters hurried this way and that like angry wasps. As if they were ready and waiting to sting the humans to death.

In all likelihood, Scahles, her people, Menet, and Baturin are all dead. But you're still alive. You have a mission to fulfill.

Chaktor started moving. They followed him into the unknown of an alien city on an alien planet, under an alien sun, among alien beings.

14.

Trker-Hon

Ferrol

The environment on this planet was cold and far too dry. The deployments in the mountainous terrain south of the megalopolis of Thorta had damaged his scales, and only a bath treatment with essential oils had kept him from the sore throat so common among the soldiers.

Trker-Hon repeatedly reminded those to whom he was the *Wise One* about the ethical principles governing their conduct. They were simple people who were occasionally struck by a lust for battle and then forgot about everything he had gone to such pains to drill into them. It was tough to deal with them, but also very rewarding. *Success always tastes bittersweet, yet rewarding.*

He clutched at his bag, at the patch over his left eye, and then at the bag again. Thrice he rhythmically slapped with his tail, almost like a dance. This sequence of movements, automatic by now, had acquired a meditative character. It helped him to concentrate on new things. On obstacles and hurdles and challenges.

A highly decorated soldier entered the tent that was at his disposal. Khor-Nauf. One of his most dependable orderlies. The soldier saluted respectfully and pounded his tail against the door gong.

“You take joy in strange Ferrons, don’t you, Wise One?”

“What do you want to say to me, Khor-Nauf?”

“A pale Ferron was taken into custody at a harbor in a small suburb. He’s surprisingly tall and has a different skin color. Perhaps an albino, like those we apprehended in the mountains.”

Trker-Hon’s interest was piqued. Was this a coincidence? Were

there more of these beings who didn't match all the rest? Did they belong to a different caste?

"Bring me to him, Khor-Nauf!"

"The auxiliary craft is standing by."

The soldier led him to sheltered terrain where a cylinder sphere waited and took off as soon as his tail crossed the threshold. The flight took only a few minutes. They kept south of the burning city, then crossed the foothills to reach the area that was the hub of trade for the residents of Thorta.

They descended among devastated halls and warehouses and landed near a pier. Khor-Nauf led him outside.

"Where are the prisoners?" Trker-Hon snarled at the nearest guard.

"Glory to you, Wise One!" The brawny man beat a fist against his chest and bowed his head. "There are in the last compound on our left. But—"

"Thank you!"

Were these strange Ferrons members of a higher caste? Were they the key to the ultimate conquest of Ferrol? Would the bloodshed end sooner than feared thanks to them?

Trker-Hon reached the compound, followed all the while by the orderly. He pulled the gate open and stepped into the dusky half-light. Until the day before yesterday, everyday goods had been stored there. Now the space served a different purpose.

"Glory to you, Wise One." Another guard offered the same servile bow.

"I wish to see the prisoners!" Why was his heart beating so quickly? Why was he nervous? What was his body trying to tell him?

The soldier led him to a shed. He fiddled around with a com unit

as if about to send a message, but then he let it lie.

“Here are the few Ferrons who surrendered,” said the soldier. “Many of them had a highly developed sense of honor and preferred to fall in battle.”

“So it will be noted in the final reports, at least. Isn’t that right?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You understand me perfectly well, soldier. To some of you, the Social Directives are mere waste paper and not something to live your life by.”

“Yes, sir.”

Trker-Hon opened the shed. He looked at the prisoners. A fellow Topsidan with the rank of lance corporal was there on guard duty. Again and again he walked back and forth, squeezing past their bodies, touching them with his bloodstained tail. It was a dance that couldn’t have been more gruesome.

“What have you done, soldier?” Trker-Hon asked. “What did you do to the prisoners?”

“Only what these unworthy fools deserved!” The lance corporal replied. He was foaming at the mouth and didn’t think of paying Trker-Hon the necessary respect.

Twenty-five or thirty dead bodies lay there, strewn across the room. Some had tried to climb the walls, take cover behind crates, dig holes in the hard ground, or hide among the corpses of their fellow Ferrons. Every last one of them had been burned to death by a single weapon.

“Have you forgotten the Third Social Directive?” Trker-Hon asked, not for the first time that day. “Respect life! Preserve it where you can. Only destroy it where it is unavoidable.”

“*Life*, Wise One?! You call that life?! The Ferrons don’t deserve that label!”

The soldier put his weapon away and left the shed without paying him another glance. His scales were feverish with excitement. He had enjoyed the appalling deed.

Trker-Hon felt lightheaded. He leaned against the wall of the shed and sank into deep sorrow. A war crime of the most awful kind had been committed here. By a soldier who didn't even understand what he had done. A symbol for the army corp's terrible moral state.

With tired steps, he approached the dead bodies. There lay the pale-skinned one. Another Ferron was holding him tightly, as if he had thrown himself in front of the albino to protect him.

Trker-Hon had come too late.

Episode 12: Death Beneath an Alien Sun

by Marc A. Herren

It's the late summer of 2036. Perry Rhodan and his companions have been stranded on the planet Ferrol since their ship was hit by the Topsidans. They have become separated from one another. Some members of the group have been taken to a Topsidian prison camp, where they have to fight for their lives.

On Earth, the situation is becoming increasingly dramatic. The strange Fantan target humans—kidnapping, and stealing what they find interesting with no consideration for others. Resistance to their superior technology appears to be in vain.

Reginald Bull, Perry Rhodan's best friend, has also been kidnapped. His first trip into outer space takes him to a mysterious space station where lifelong imprisonment seems to await him and his companions...

1.

Bernhard Frank

Munich, July 9, 2036

He opened his eyes.

Below him the Earth was floating like a wonderful blue precious stone in the blackness of space, interrupted only by the twinkling of the stars.

He was currently floating above Europe—the mainland with Germany, France, Spain and the easily recognizable boot of Italy. The Mediterranean, with North Africa as part of its coastline, the Middle and Far East, the British Isles at the top, and then Scandinavia.

Single banks of clouds floated over the countries he knew only too well. The people down there were going to have a summer day full of sunshine.

Bernhard smiled, happy. He not only had a second apartment in Munich, but other apartments in Hamburg, Göteborg, on the Scottish Isle of Skye, one near Reykjavik, and one in Ireland. He owned a small house near the southern Irish town of Youghal. Walter Ernsting, an author he had very much liked as a teenager, and actually still did, had once resided there. His farthest-away domicile—an impressive log cabin in the woods—was in Canada. He traveled there only rarely, as he preferred to be in Europe closer to his family.

He sighed happily. Bernhard had always dreamed of seeing the Earth as a whole. And now this dream had come true.

The Earth. How much life and diversity, how much wealth it contained.

Wealth. Not only the dwindling resources of crude oil, rare metals and minerals mainly used to produce technical toys. No!

Wealth in the form of his three daughters with his wife Angelica or a lonely sunset in his house in Ireland with a glass of whiskey.

Up here he could almost forget the sad conditions that humankind lived in. How were some people motivated by hate, envy, greed, or religious fanaticism in everything they did? Without any consideration whatsoever of other people or nature? They robbed, destroyed, oppressed others just because they *could*, because they had the power to do so.

Bernhard thought of himself first and foremost as a conservative person who usually felt happiest when his friends and family wanted for nothing. He was content when things stayed the way they were—obviously, with the exception of technical gadgets, traveling, and other things that his wonderful wealth had allowed him to enjoy.

But the world's suffering, with all its social injustices, environmental catastrophes, and the seemingly constant threats of war did not leave him cold.

Would the visions of a man like Perry Rhodan change that?

He chased away these dark thoughts. It was far too beautiful a day to busy himself with such terrible things just after waking up. Bernhard closed his eyes, wanting to enjoy a few more minutes of sleep.

At that very moment, the first beats of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss boomed out. A trumpet fanfare sounded out over the dark tremolo of double bass, bassoon, organ, and the large drums—and the sun came up. The more powerfully the music swelled, the stronger the sun shone, pushing its way out from behind the Earth, where it had previously been hidden from his view.

"Good morning, grumpy!" the Pudler announced.

Bernhard blinked, still tired. "How late is it?"

"Six-twenty," the voice from his pod called over from the desk as

the volume of the loud music started lowering.

“You’re supposed to wake me at seven o’clock,” he complained.

“I am aware of that,” the Pudler answered. “But your diary says that you want to have breakfast with Angelica on the farm.”

Bernhard yawned and rubbed his face with both hands. He had played an online game until almost one in the morning. It was based on a German-language science-fiction series he had read when he was a teenager, of which he had managed to read 3.908 weekly issues to date. He would have given anything to sleep a little longer.

“I woke you up earlier because there was an accident on the highway and you’ll have to drive overland if you want to take the chopper. You’d be faster with the maglev train, but I calculated a lesser probability for that. The weather is excellent today. You’ll enjoy the trip.”

“Thanks!” he grumbled. “You did the right thing. But you talk too much for this time of the morning. Adjust your settings.”

“I will do that,” the Pudler’s voice promised. “Should I switch on the kitchen appliances?”

“Only the coffee machine, thanks!”

Bernhard wondered whether he should give Angelica a quick buzz on the net to ask her if she would prefer to have lunch with him instead of breakfast. But that was a bad idea. Ever since he had stopped having to go to work and was able to organize his days as he liked, Angelica had regularly been giving him beef about changing plans at the last minute just because it suited him. It got on his nerves, but he had to admit she was right to accuse him of that particular bad habit.

“Breakfast, here I come.”

He swung his legs out of the bed. With a flick of his hand, he switched off the Samsung monitor, and the 3D film from his trip on the Virgin Space ferry disappeared.

With a sigh, he remained sitting on the edge of the bed, stretched his back, and massaged his stiff neck. He wanted to get into the habit of taking on a more relaxed position while sitting in front of the kinetikpad. At nearly sixty-five years of age, he was just too old for tensions and pains that were of his own making.

"Bernhard," the Pudler said, "you should try to move faster. Showering and the rest of your morning bathroom routines usually take eight and a half minutes on average. Getting dressed, drinking a coffee, and reading the e-paper takes you up to twenty minutes. That means you must leave the house by seven o'clock at the latest to make it to your loving wife on time."

He got up with a sigh, grabbed his pod, and trudged into the bathroom. "Who programmed you anyway? It's a disaster!" he complained.

"It was you, if I am not mistaken," the voice replied.

"That makes it all the worse." He placed the pod in its wall-holder.

"What about a little rock music?"

"Sure," he answered as he slipped out of his underwear.

"Nazareth, Guns n' Roses, Metallica?"

"Wonderful. In that order, please."

He pushed aside the door to the shower, got in, and touched the sensors for water temperature, pressure, and spray width. While *Hair of the Dog* blasted through the bathroom, he was enveloped in a cloud of warm water.

"Would you like some stimulating oleates?" the Pudler asked him through the shower computer's loudspeaker.

"Yes, please."

Frank always said "please" when talking to the Pudler. His daughters poked fun at him because of it, but that didn't bother

him.

Mark had given him the luxury device as a souvenir of their adventure together on Route 66. The Pudler—a mixture of “pod” and “butler”—was an exclusive app from the Facebook foundry that Bernhard was allowed to test. It was connected to all news channels and every single object he was permitted to use that had a chip.

Bernhard lathered himself with soap, massaging his face as Axel Rose’s voice boomed out, singing about the rain in November. He grinned. Luckily, his shower felt more like the summer than the winter rain.

“It’s about time too.”

“Yeah, yeah, you pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, yeah, you pain in the ass,” Bernhard yelled.

He switched off the water and activated the hot air fans. Wafts of air blew across his body, moving up and down. Twenty seconds later he was dry.

Bernhard brushed his teeth, shaved his stubble, and slipped into his clothes, which were already laid out. He patted the pants only to realize that his billfold was missing.

“Pudler—where did I leave my billfold?”

“I am sorry, Bernhard,” the answer came immediately, “but you ignored my request at the time to equip your new billfold with an RFID chip.”

“Smartass,” Frank murmured.

“Perhaps it is in the pants you handed in to the cleaners? Should I ask them?”

“Yes, do that,” he said, giving up. “Thank you!”

No matter. He wouldn’t be needing his billfold today anyway.

Bernhard went with the pod into the kitchen, inserted it into the tabletop port, took a cup of steaming hot coffee out of the machine, and grabbed the e-paper.

“Good morning, darling,” Angelica said, already sitting at the table.

“Good morning, darling,” he replied, letting the e-paper drop onto the table. “Did you want to check whether I would get up on time?”

She laughed. “If I’m being honest, yes I did. I heard there was an accident on the highway. I wanted to ask if you had changed your plans at short notice,”

Bernhard pointed at the cup with the steam still rising from it. “No, darling, I’m just going to allow myself this one cup of coffee, then I’ll be on my way.”

“Did your toy kick your ass?”

He grinned. “The Pudler is the best.”

“You should get Mark to let you design an advertising strategy.”

“He already offered me that job,” Bernhard answered with a broad smile on his face. “But I don’t want to. I still find early retirement much too pleasant.”

Angelica nodded. “I’m going to feed the animals,” she announced. “Drive carefully.”

“Nothing can happen to me. The chopper has just been serviced and it’s connected to the traffic guidance system.”

“Okay. See you in a little while!”

Angelica’s hologram disappeared.

Since the Facebook app allowed hologram conferences, they could actually have breakfast together every morning whether he was in Germany, Ireland, Scotland, Scandinavia, or Canada. And

they did just that every now and again. However, a holo conference could never replace a cozy breakfast where they could pass one another the butter and jam.

Bernhard turned his attention back to the newspaper. It felt like a normal piece of paper but had intelligent and sophisticated technology inside.

He swiped across the top edge. The title page of the German edition of the *Huffington Post* appeared. He was not surprised that the main stories all focused on the goings-on in the Gobi and on the Moon. The American, Perry Rhodan, had set something in motion that could only end in one of two ways: humanity would come together in the realization that they did not represent the pinnacle of all creation...or they would be destroyed.

All around the city, which was protected by an energy shield, thousands of his followers had gathered—people who shared Rhodan's vision of a neutral power.

"Bernhard?"

"Yes?"

"A visitor is about to arrive."

He screwed up his forehead. "On a Friday? Who can it be?"

"Your daughter, Caroline," the Pudler said. "She informed me that she was coming as she was getting into the taxi."

"She's taking a taxi?" he asked, surprised. "Not her company car? She's working today..."

"I do not know, Bernhard," the Pudler said. "I do not have access to such information."

Bernhard was happy to see his eldest daughter. At the same time, he found a spontaneous visit like this a little unsettling. He knew she was on the police duty roster today. What reason might she have for coming to see him?

For a moment, he thought she might want to tell him she was going to be a mother. However, unlike her two sisters, she was not in a relationship at the moment. No. There must be another, more serious reason for Caroline's visit.

The minutes felt like hours, and then finally the sound of the doorbell brought a wave of relief. He flung the door open immediately.

Caroline looked at him in surprise for a second before a wide grin lit up her face. "Were you waiting behind the door for me, Paps?"

Bernhard nodded and hugged his oldest daughter tightly. Her cheerful expression dispelled any dark thoughts he might have had.

"Hey—slowly, slowly!"

"Sorry, Caroline. Come in!"

She dashed in, slipped off her leather jacket, and hung it up in the cloakroom. Caroline Frank, now twenty-nine years of age, was blond, slim, and enviously attractive. A little too attractive for Bernhard's taste—he was not particularly happy about her decision to join the federal police force. She had always had a caring side to her character. He would have preferred to see her writing about the world's social injustices as a journalist rather than have her looking for missing children and adolescents.

"I was just about to drive to meet your mother," he said. "We wanted to have breakfast together."

"I know, Paps. Our pod diaries are synchronized, or did you forget that?"

He pushed a hand through what little hair he had left. "I'm glad to see you, but shouldn't you be at work? Can the feds even manage without you?"

Caroline tipped her head to one side and looked at him with a reprimanding grin. "Come on, let's go into the kitchen. I want to tell you something. Is that freshly made coffee I smell?"

There it was again—that uneasy feeling at the pit of his stomach. “Freshly brewed,” he confirmed. “There should be enough for another two cups.”

They went into the kitchen. Caroline filled his cup and added milk and sugar to her own.

“The milk is past its expiration date in two days,” the fridge computer announced. “I’ll put two cartons on the shopping list. They will be delivered tomorrow by 5 p.m. with the other orders.”

“Oh-oh!” Caroline said. “A speaking fridge. Does it also tell you when you’re snacking too often or when the cheese starts to get moldy?”

“Ehm…yes,” he admitted after a slight pause. “But for God’s sake! Who’s interested in my fridge? Tell me, what’s going on, Caro!”

“It might be better if you sit down.”

He let himself drop onto one of the chairs with a deep sigh. “It’s not about one of your foreign missions for Interpol again, is it?” he asked. “You know I hardly get a wink of sleep when you’re out there chasing international gangsters!”

She looked at him over the edge of her coffee cup, amused. Frank waited patiently while she took a large sip before putting the mug down again.

“You know very well that my main job is not chasing gangsters. My area is looking for missing children and adolescents,” she explained in a gentle tone of voice. “However, you’re not totally off the mark, Paps. I will be going abroad. But not to Interpol in Lyon.”

Bernhard had a terrible hunch. He wanted to lift his own mug to his mouth, but his hand was shaking too much, so he put it down again. A little coffee spilled over the edges, the hot liquid running over his hand. He ignored it.

“Please don’t let your poor old father suffer, Caro. Tell me what’s going on.”

His daughter wrapped both her hands around her mug, as if to warm herself up.

“I quit my job today,” she said in a serious tone. “I’ve taken all my outstanding holiday leave as well as my overtime, which means I don’t have to work a single day between now and my actual end date.”

Frank held his breath. He was expecting the worst…a dagger between his ribs to be sure.

“I’ve decided to join Perry Rhodan.”

He let out the air he had been holding on to, and a strangely high-pitched, plaintive sound escaped his lips. Bernhard had suspected as much. In his mind’s eye he saw the people between Rhodan’s protective shield and the roaring guns of the Chinese People’s Army, waiting to be let into the new city.

“Don’t do this to me,” he said. “Please!”

Caroline bent forward and took his shaking hand. Her fingers were cool to the touch. She must have been just as nervous as he was, but she was better at concealing it.

“Why?” he asked.

“I think that Rhodan and his people could use someone like me.”

“Someone like you? What do you mean?”

Caroline looked at him for a few seconds. “Can you remember our first holiday in the Bernese Oberland?”

“In 2020?” he asked, surprised. “Of course I do. How could I forget it? That’s when I found Elliot.”

Caroline took a deep breath and looked at him with that expression she always had on her face when she wanted to present him with a fait accompli.

“And can you remember that you always came to me when you

lost something? Your keys, the remote control, the autographed Sagan novel we gave you for Christmas?"

Frank frowned. "Of course I remember. I always assumed you had taken the things we were looking for yourself, and that's why you were always able to find them so fast."

Caroline laughed out loud. "That's what you thought? No, that wasn't quite the way it was. You always lost things yourself, but I always knew where they were."

He opened his mouth to say something but changed his mind and closed it again. Then he asked, "What are you trying to tell me?"

"When Elliot Zuckerberg disappeared from his boarding school in the Bernese Oberland back then, for me it was just like when your keys or other possessions went missing—I knew instinctively where he was. I knew where the kidnappers were hiding him."

Bernhard swallowed as if to get rid of the lump that was forming in his throat. He could clearly remember every single detail of that summer day in 2020 that would change his life forever. While walking in the mountains, they had suddenly come upon the hut. Caroline insisted on using the toilet, refusing to go behind a bush.

Frank thought the men in the hut were highly suspect the minute he set eyes on them. They were Americans, and they had sent Caroline and him packing in a very brusque manner.

His suspicions were reinforced when he saw a dark blue child's jacket. He decided immediately to call the police, who then came and—to everyone's astonishment—found the kidnapped Elliot Zuckerberg, the ten-year-old son of US billionaire and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, inside.

It had not only made Bernhard famous overnight, it also turned him into one of the richest men in Germany. He, Bernhard Frank, who before that had been a respectable IT expert who earned his money as a technical editor.

Zuckerberg was so happy to have his son back that he gave Bernhard an indecently generous share package and invited him regularly to California. Since then, he had been a billionaire, owned apartments and houses in all his favorite places to visit, and he had fulfilled his dream of traveling the legendary Route 66. Not only that, he was also furnished by Mark with a steady supply of the newest technical gadgets.

Caroline looked at him with expectation in her eyes. He stared at her, taken aback. Then his brain registered what she had been saying. He couldn't—no, he *did not want* to believe what he'd heard.

"Buthow can that be possible?" he asked. "Finding Elliot was a coincidence! Our holiday in the Bernese Oberland, our walk in the mountains that day..."

Caroline put on an exaggeratedly innocent face. "...my indigestion, which suddenly disappeared the minute we arrived at the hut. My innocent questions about the blue jacket..."

Bernhard let out a soft moan. "That was you? All of it? But the holiday and that walk..."

His daughter laughed. "Paps, you should know that daughters can talk their fathers into almost anything. After all, you did bring the three of us up!"

Bernhard looked at her. He didn't know whether he should laugh or cry. "You knew from the very beginning that Elliot was being kept in that hut?"

"The same way I always knew where you had lost your keys," she said. "And how I know that you're now looking for your billfold. It's in the lockable compartment of your electric chopper, by the way."

His jaw dropped. "But... But why did you never tell me? Why did you let me believe that I was the one who found Elliot?"

"I was thirteen years old and really scared of my powers back then. I didn't want to be a *freak* like the figures in your science-

fiction books."

"Mutants," he corrected her, his voice faltering. "They're not freaks, they're mutants."

Caroline smiled. "Whatever. I needed a little time to get used to my special talent. And I enjoyed the fact that you were suddenly presented in the media as a hero. And I was happy that we suddenly had so much money and you were able to make all your dreams come true."

"But..."

She held his hand tighter. Her fingers suddenly felt warm and strong. "Don't misunderstand me, Paps. You were always a hero in my eyes. So I was happy that the rest of the world finally knew it too."

A tear slipped out of the corner of his left eye and rolled down his cheek. "This... This talent you have...," he began, his lips trembling. And then his throat tightened so much that he had difficulty breathing.

"It's nothing bad, Paps," Caroline said. She got up. "I use it to find missing children and adolescents. You wouldn't believe how many people I have brought back together thanks to my special gifts."

"And now you want to use them for Perry Rhodan?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Caroline came around the kitchen table and sat on his lap, just like she had done when she was a little girl. "Maybe I can help Rhodan to make his vision of a unified, peaceful Earth come true. Even if it's only a tiny contribution. Don't you think I should at least try?"

Bernhard hugged his daughter as the tears rolled down his face. She returned the hug and gently stroked his back.

"Which brings me to the real reason for my visit," she whispered quietly in his left ear. "What do you think about the idea of us

going on this trip together? For example...to the Gobi?”

2.

Reginald Bull

The Fantan ship

"What's wrong with him, Eric? Damn! Look at the strange angle of his arm. Is it broken!"

"Calm down, Reg!" Manoli answered. "Let me do my job!"

"Will he die?"

Manoli looked up briefly. "No, Sue. Not if I can treat him immediately and without interruption."

Sue looked at Bull, her eyes seeking help and support from him. Bull laid his arm around her thin shoulder.

"Let the doc do his work. Sid's in the best hands." Inside, Reginald Bull felt a mixture of anger, defiance, and fear for the young man's life.

The Fantan crisis had begun relatively harmlessly. When these strange aliens had shown no signs of aggression, the nations of Earth had taken their fingers off the trigger again. The cylinder-shaped extraterrestrials had turned out to be curious collectors of all sorts of objects, some of them totally useless. During the confrontation on the Fantan ship, Bull did not think the two teenagers Sue and Sid would be exposed to any real danger. Especially as Sid González had a "life insurance" of sorts thanks to his powers as a teleporter. The formerly overweight boy, who had slimmed down rapidly from the exertions of his "jumps," could have teleported out of the alien ship, the *Sregar-Nakut*, at any time.

Then things started to move fast, because another, larger Fantan ship had supposedly turned up and the Fantan had taken off in an emergency launch. Before Bull and the others could react to what was happening, the *Sregar-Nakut* had activated its energy shield.

That's what you get for bringing children on a mission like this, you idiot, he thought to himself angrily. *Obviously, sooner or later, Sid would try to play the hero. Jesus, Maria and Joseph, please let him pull through. I would never forgive myself.*

Sid "Spark" González had wanted to overcome the energy shield using his teleportation skills. Bull had tried to hold him back, but how the hell do you stop a teleporter who doesn't want to do what you say?

The floor of the storage room vibrated slightly. In the midst of hundreds of useless objects, which the Fantan referred to as Besun, there was a loud noise that sounded like the cymbals of a drum kit had fallen to the ground. Somewhere in the ship machines hummed. Giant energy generators, drive blocks, something like that.

Reginald Bull didn't care about that. He didn't care what star in what system the Fantan brought them to as long as the boy's life was saved.

Damn!

"The symptoms are the same as from a strong electric shock," Manoli, who was kneeling down beside the boy, informed him.

He did a routine check of Sid's eyes, neck, and breathing. Then, in one firm movement, he tore Sid's shirt open. Buttons flew off and landed on the floor.

"He's stopped breathing and I can't feel a pulse," he added, while seeking a certain point on Sid's breastbone that was hidden beneath a thick layer of black chest hair. Manoli's voice sounded steady and under control. Not a trace of panic. "Because his limbs snapped outwards without control, his arm is broken. I'll take care of that once his heart is beating again."

Bull looked at Sid's chest hair. When he had met Sid González, the boy had still been a half-child, but Sid was, after all, already sixteen.

Somewhere between a child and an adult, Bull thought, shaken. *Between human and mutant, between the old world and the new. And between life and death.*

Manoli placed both his hands on Sid's chest, interlocked his fingers to begin resuscitation. Then he stopped, checked Sid's chest, and then began all over again.

The doctor looked up. "He has a ventricular fibrillation, Reg," he said in a serious tone. *Too* serious a tone.

"What does that mean?" Sue asked.

A layer of sweat shimmered on her chalk-white skin. She pulled her hand through her hair over and over again. Bull could see she wanted to do something and that she was almost desperate because she did not know how to help. He felt exactly the same way.

"The chambers in Sid's heart are quivering erratically," Manoli answered without interrupting what he was doing. "The heart muscle can no longer contract normally."

"That's dangerous, isn't it?"

Manoli stopped massaging Sid's chest, stretched the boy's head back, pinched his nose closed with his fingers, and blew into Sid's mouth. Sid's chest lifted slightly. Manoli repeated the procedure and then went back to doing the heart massage.

Bull pressed his lips tightly together. First aid during his astronaut training had not been one of his favorite units, but he had never doubted its importance. Ventricular fibrillation happens when the electrical conduction system of the cells in the heart muscle makes the heart quiver instead of pumping normally. The beats of the heart are usually caused by regular electrical impulses in the sinoatrial nodes, and they are passed on by the electrical conduction system via the atriums in the heart to all other parts of the muscle. In this way, the heart muscle is regulated, the heart contracts, then another electrical impulse comes and the heart pumps regularly again.

The shock, which had hit Sid like an electric shock when he'd tried to jump through the protective shield, had caused the impulse waves to run uncontrolled in different directions, in turn causing the fibrillation in the chambers of his heart. A manual heart massage did not work for ventricular fibrillation. There was only one possible way to restore a regular heartbeat, and that was another electric shock.

"We have to defibrillate immediately!" Bull yelled.

"How can we explain to the Fantan that we need a device that creates a strong electric shock?" Manoli asked.

"We..." All of a sudden, Bull knew the answer. He looked at Manoli, surprised. Why had he not thought of it earlier? He jumped up. "We don't need the help of those damned cylinders. I know where we can find a defibrillator. Wait here!"

"Okay, Reg," Manoli answered. "Hurry. Every minute we lose is a minute too long."

Bull ran off. It was now a matter of life and death. Manoli would continue the reanimation process until he returned. However, without defibrillation, which would force the cardiac muscle to contract in full, Sid would die. Sometimes things were just that simple.

As he ran along the corridor, he tried to remember exactly *where* he had seen the vehicle. He had only glimpsed it for a second, the Fantan had brought such a chaotic collection of objects from the Earth.

Bull was reminded of a game he had played as a child—a game that helped train the memory. *I went to market,* it was called. Someone 'went to the market' and put an imaginary object in their shopping basket, and then the next person added another object to it. Every time it was someone else's turn, another object was added. And the longer the game went on, the wilder the objects in the imaginary shopping basket became. *I went to market and I bought a shirt, a toothbrush, a pod, an apple, a thermos...*

And now, all of a sudden it was *I went to market, and I bought for my spaceship a letterbox, a glass recycling container, a bike, a solar panel, a toilet house, an ambulance ...*

An ambulance! Bull had only seen the white vehicle with the red and neon yellow stripes briefly, and not even very clearly among the flow of objects. But it did catch his attention, and he asked himself whether the ambulance had become Besun while it was out on a call, and if somebody down on Earth had therefore ended up in an even more unfortunate situation.

Skelir came in his direction on a flying vehicle that looked like a motorcycle without wheels.

“What are you doing here?” he shouted at Bull.

“We have an emergency,” Bull called back to him. He was not about to lose valuable time explaining the situation to a Fantan. “The launch of your ship caused one of my companions physical harm!”

“Oh,” said the strange being, whose words were interpreted by Bull’s translation disk. “Not Sue Mirafiore, I hope?”

“No!” Bull yelled as he hurried past the astounded Fantan and disappeared around the next bend in the corridor.

Where had he seen the damned ambulance? A good fifteen minutes had passed since then. It was possible the Fantan had stored it away somewhere else on the spindle-shaped ship.

Bull ran past a collection of advertising signs. Half of them were lit up and flashing—either they got their energy from an internal fuel cell or via state-of-the-art light collectors.

“Stop!” a croaky voice shouted out. “Stay where you are, Besun!”

Bull slowed down, not because he was following orders but because he had discovered the neon-colored stripes of the ambulance half-concealed behind a children’s carousel.

Two Fantan on antigrav platforms moved towards him. They were gesticulating wildly with their extremities.

“Sorry, no time!” he called out.

He ran to the ambulance as fast as his legs would carry him. He pulled the handle on the rear door and cursed. It was locked. He tried the driver and passenger doors as well as the sliding door on the side. None of them opened.

“What are you doing there? You are Besun!” the words coming out of Bull’s translator said.

He wasn’t about to let them get in his way. He pulled his sleeve over his wrist and hit the glass pane of the sliding door several times with his fist. It withstood every single blow.

He whirled around. “I have to get something out of this vehicle right away,” he shouted in the direction of the aliens. “Which of you is going to be the first to help me open it?”

The two cylindrical figures with their fine-scaled skin looked at him out of their dark openings. At least, he assumed they were staring at him—no doubt with very little understanding of what was going on—because it was impossible to tell what function the different openings of the Fantan fulfilled. It could also be that they only had their openings for listening and speaking directed at him.

“Besun are not permitted to help themselves to other Besun!”

“I’m not helping myself to anything!” he yelled. “I only need... Ugh, you can kiss my...”

He ran towards the carousel, jumped onto the rotating platform, and crashed with all his strength against one of the horses. The pole that the wooden horse was fixed to gave way with a loud crack. Bull lifted his right leg and kicked the horse with his heel with as much impact as he could manage. After the sixth kick, the pole jumped out of the metal base it had been inserted into with a loud cracking sound. It only took two or three strong twists and he was able to free it from the fixture holding it to the top of the carousel.

He ran past the Fantan, who did not move from their spots, towards the ambulance, holding the horse and pole. Like a knight in an old-fashioned tournament, he aimed the pole at his target—the only difference being that, unlike Percival and his cohorts, he had his horse tucked in tightly below his arm.

The glass window of the ambulance smashed on his first attempt. He pulled the pole back out, making the hole even bigger, until he was able to stick his hand through and open the door from the inside.

"Hallelujah!" he called out as he tossed the horse and pole aside and jumped into the ambulance.

The Fantan had probably transported the ambulance from wherever they had found it to their ship by antigrav ray. Either they had been extremely gentle in their work or the ambulance was extremely robust. The instruments were still hanging on the walls where they should be, not a single drawer had opened, and even the two pens were still sticking to their magnetic holders on the small writing surface in an orderly row.

Bull did not have to look for long to find the defibrillator. The black, yellow, and gray case was sitting at the top end of the locked-in stretcher on a box-shaped cabinet. It had several pockets and was held in place by retaining straps.

"A combined ECG Defibrillator," Bull murmured to himself as he loosened the straps. "Eric'll be happy about that."

He held the case tightly under one arm and was just about to get out when he spotted a fire-red backpack. With a fierce snarl, he put down the defibrillator, pulled on the straps of the emergency backpack, picked up the case with the defibrillator again, and jumped out of the ambulance.

"Stay where you are!" one of the Fantan called out. "We must know immediately whose—"

"Ask Skelir!" Bull yelled, and hurried past them.

He ran back through the corridors he had come by, concentrating. He had taken two turns on the way there, which he couldn't risk missing on his way back. Groaning, he dodged the Fantan who was coming towards him holding a standard lamp in its arm extremities, blocking half the corridor with it.

Bull was panting. While he was in very good condition, especially for a man his age, the combination of sprinting, carrying the heavy equipment, and the obstacle course he was running cost him a great deal of energy.

How many minutes had passed since Sid had collided with the protective shield? Three? Four or even five?

Nothing must happen to the boy. It was possible that Bull's last sprint would decide whether Sid's heart would be able to start pumping again before the lack of oxygen did serious damage to his brain. He held the ECG defibrillator case closer to his body and ran even faster.

"I'm coming, Eric!" he called out as he ran towards them. "I've got everything with me!"

Manoli looked up. "Very good, Reg."

The doctor carried out resuscitation measures on Sid another two times, then he jumped up and grabbed the equipment from Bull.

"Things have to go fast," Manoli said. "Reg, look in the emergency backpack and see if it has any intubation equipment."

Bull kneeled down and opened the backpack. He quickly found the beak-like instrument and the breathing tube.

"What can I do?" Sue asked quietly.

"Take off your jacket, fold it together, and place it under Sid's head."

While Sue did her bit, Manoli switched on the defibrillator, placed an electrode on the right-hand chest muscle, and one on the left-hand side. A line appeared on the ECG display, and a symbol

that flickered rapidly.

“Do they have to be attached at such an angle?” Sue asked in an agitated voice. She stroked her fingers across Sid’s waxy-looking forehead. “It didn’t look like that in the films I’ve seen.”

Bull, who was still breathing very heavily and sitting at Sid’s side holding out the incubation instruments said: “You have to trust the doctor! The heart muscle is exactly between the two electrodes.”

Manoli looked up. “Sue, slide back a little. You can touch Sid again afterwards.”

Sue immediately pulled her hand away. Manoli activated the defibrillator. There was a buzzing noise, and Sid’s upper body jerked upwards, then collapsed back down again.

Manoli turned around to check the ECG display and felt for Sid’s pulse.

“Intubation!”

Bull stretched his arms out. Manoli took the beak-like instrument and introduced it into Sid’s trachea. After that, he inserted the tube and attached a resuscitation balloon to it.

“Sue,” he said calmly but firmly, “can you hold the balloon with your hand?”

The fifteen-year-old girl, who actually looked ten, grabbed the rubber part, which was more than three times bigger than her fist. As she only had one hand, she had difficulty holding the balloon steady. She moved a little closer to Sid and held the balloon against her upper body, then nodded to Manoli.

He began with the cardiac massage again. “The first attempt was unsuccessful. We’ll repeat it once more. Don’t worry, we’ll get Sid back. Sue, press the balloon tightly again. Good, and one more time!”

Bull frowned. He had the feeling that Sid’s face was getting paler all the time. *Damn!* he thought. *Why did you have to jump?*

“Good, Sue. Now, please step back again!”

Manoli activated the defibrillator, and Sid’s chest once again raised up. There was a gurgling sound before his body sank back down to its original position.

Sue let out a scream. “He’s alive, he’s alive!”

A longer sound came out of the boy’s throat and through the tube. Sid’s arms flew upwards. Manoli reacted in a split second and pulled the tube out of his throat.

Sid choked. His eyes rolled, and he stretched his hands up into the air as if he wanted to push someone away. “No flames!” he cried out. “Please, Doctor Goratschin, no more flames!”

Sue crawled closer to him and brushed his dark hair gently away from his eyes. “We’re here, Sid,” she managed to say in between sobs. “Eric, Reg, and I are here. You don’t have to be afraid anymore!”

Manoli removed the adhesive electrodes, taking off some of Sid’s chest hair in the process. Underneath were patches of reddish-violet skin.

Sid shook his head as if he were trying to shake off a bad dream. “Sue?” he asked quietly. “Am I alive? Where are the flames? Where are we?”

Manoli placed a hand on the teen’s cheek. “On board the Fantan spindle ship. You wanted to play the hero, Sid. You thought your powers were stronger than the protective shield. The flames you saw were nothing more than your own powers as you collided with the shield.”

Sid looked at him doubtfully. Then the pictures and information seemed to connect in his head. He suddenly seemed even more tired than before.

“So we’re out there now? In space?”

Bull stood up. His knees were shaking from the relief of hearing

Sid's voice. He rubbed the sweat from his face.

"We've probably already left lunar orbit," he said. "Who knows whether we're even still in our solar system. Just imagine, our very first flight into space, and under such lousy circumstances! Who would ever have thought that we..."

Just then, somebody whacked him hard with a baseball bat in the back of his neck. Everything was suddenly very bright.

Bull collapsed. The last things he saw were the upper bodies of Sue and Manoli as they tilted over sideways in slow motion.

Bull wanted to curse.

3.

Rico

The Bohai Sea, July 31, 2036

“What are you trying to say?”

Rico was sitting upright in the dilapidated chair. Every time he moved his body, it squeaked somewhere. It was a terrible noise that made him feel uneasy to the core.

“Neither of us are human,” the woman he had come to know as *Queen*—but who now insisted she was called *Quiniu Soptor*—repeated. “We could, of course, compare our genetic data at the nearest clinic—as in, *show me yours and I’ll show you mine*—but I’m afraid we don’t have the time for that. So you’ll just have to trust your eyes.”

She looked around furtively, and Rico followed her gaze. There were hardly any guests in the shabby little fish restaurant on this Thursday evening. Four men in dirty gray suits were sitting at a table, eating silently. Given their darker skin, Rico believed them to be Malaysians. It was obvious they were not tourists. They probably worked for the nearby cement factory, which was lit up, making it stand out against the evening sky at the end of the beach and the small harbor.

There was a strangely tense silence in the air. Every now and then a wave broke onto the shore, a seagull cried, and Rico felt a sense of inner unease. The sea pulled at him as always, and this strange woman confused him. She had changed the color of her eyes only minutes before, and they had suddenly looked Arkonide red.

“Look at this,” Quiniu whispered. She pulled her dress to the side and a little downwards, then scraped the tip of her index finger across the skin where her left breast began. The skin split open, despite the fact that Rico did not see a scalpel. Not even a well-prepared fingernail. As she dug her index and middle fingers into

the slit that had just appeared and pulled them apart, he saw deep black skin underneath.

Rico blinked, and immediately he could see the area she was revealing much better. *Black skin.* Many people on Earth had dark skin. They originated from the continent of Africa, which was referred to as "the cradle of humanity."

"I don't understand," Rico murmured. "You told me you were an Arkonide. But the red eyes and the black skin don't fit with that."

"Many things are not as they seem these days," she said mysteriously. "Since Thora chose me to accompany her, things have been revealed to me that I would never have considered possible. And I am not talking about this strange little planet that has been catapulted into a new age. I am speaking of myself. I have never been left to my own devices before. It's a feeling like...like..."

"The way you look," Rico insisted. "What's wrong with it?"

Quiniu Soptor passed a hand across her eyes. Just like a few minutes ago, as they had been standing up to their knees in the waves, her irises had changed color. The blood red was now silver.

"You're not an Arkonide!" Rico stated.

"I am an Arkonide," the woman replied with a gentle smile. "Although my dominant genome originates from an imperial planet that is far away from Arkon."

"Why did you..."

"Don't you understand, Rico?"

"You wanted to have my full attention," he said.

"You are very attractive, and you are very mentally agile," Quiniu responded. She sighed quietly. "There are not many Arkonides of your sort. Most of them have less pure blood in their veins than I do."

Rico frowned. "The term 'pure blood' is not scientific. Unless you

take blood plasma and...”

The woman threw her head back and laughed.

Rico sighed. “I just don’t understand. What’s all this about? And what do you want from me?”

Quiniu sat up and waited until a skinny Chinese girl placed a sealed bottle of water on the table before disappearing again. Then she said. “I should start the story from the beginning, Rico. Maybe that will make you less confused.”

“Please do.”

Quiniu gazed at him for a few seconds. She said nothing, the corners of her mouth turned up in a smile. “Who are you?”

“I am...Rico,” he said. “I came from...from the...” He fell silent. Everything he wanted to say somehow felt *wrong*. “I’m not sure,” he finally admitted. “But you seem to know more than I do.”

Quiniu stabbed her fork into a piece of white vegetable and brought it to her mouth. “Can I guess?”

“Yes, please do.”

“Thora chose me and Tamika to accompany her on a reconnaissance mission through our solar system. When we were above the second planet, our recon craft were attacked by the machines in the citadel. Unlike Thora and Tamika, I was lucky. Although I wasn’t aware of it at the time, I was flying in the shadow of Thora’s ship. The defense systems of my recon craft activated to full capacity. As the protective fields only had to absorb a small amount of the energy, my drive had enough power to launch an escape maneuver.”

“You’re the third person Thora was talking about!” Rico exclaimed. Suddenly, he could remember Thora’s words clearly. It was as if Quiniu’s report had contained a password that had opened up a hidden memory file.

“Exactly.”

"Why did you not try to contact Thora?"

"I was able to escape," Quiniu continued, "but my craft was damaged by the energy hits and the hasty entry into the planet's atmosphere. I was able to land it safely, but I had to wait until the repair routines were completed before I could take off again."She waved her hand through the air as if wanting to swat away an insect. "I assumed that Thora had either survived and had the situation under control or that she had died during the crash. In either case, it would have achieved nothing to launch some kind of rescue mission."

"Was your radio no longer working?"

Quiniu gave Rico a look he couldn't decipher. "I had never been so alone, had never had to fend myself as much as I had to in that moment." She pushed her fork to one side, dabbed her lips with her napkin, and placed her hand on his right wrist. "It may sound strange or egoistic, but I needed that time to myself. Can you understand that?"

Rico nodded thoughtfully. "Without having that time left to my own devices, I would not have become...*hm*...what I am today."

She gave him that look again, the one Rico didn't quite know how to interpret. He had the feeling, however, that this woman wasn't lying to him. More than that, Rico was suddenly certain that his destiny was intertwined with Quiniu Soptor's.

He did not know what facts and figures he based this assumption on. His biological computer components had obviously not yet regenerated sufficiently. He could feel an imbalance between the cool logic of his positronics and the emotional elements of his biomodule.

Rico's memory functions were suffering as a result. Information about particularly important aspects of his own history and life purpose were missing either in part or completely. He didn't know why he had a longing to go to the sea—no, *into* the sea. He was looking for *him,* but he had forgotten who *he* was. The man who built him? His master? His Arkonide counterpart; that is, the person

who acted as the template for his own existence?

“And what are you?” Quiniu asked him.

Rico looked at her, surprised. Had she read his thoughts? Had Arkonide technology developed so far that his inner life was suddenly as visible as the movements of his facial expressions?

“You said you also needed time alone to become what you are today,” she reminded him, “which is why I want to know exactly what you are. Whether you can suddenly remember.”

“Oh,” Rico replied. His body relaxed after it had automatically switched to flight mode. “That’s what you wanted to tell me. Do you have a theory?”

The woman squeezed her eyes together. The reflection of the light made her silver irises light up as if they were shining from within.

“Once my recon craft was fully repaired, I flew back to the third planet. I came too late, something I was to realize a short time later. By listening to snippets of radio transmissions and the busy flow of information via Earth’s satellite network, I was able to gain a picture of what was going on. Some of the information I heard seemed too absurd to be true. Apparently, the underdeveloped ones had managed to destroy the *Aetron*? It was said that Crest was being kept prisoner by one of Earth’s power blocs—could that be? And Thora is supposed to have already come to the third planet on a strange Arkonide auxiliary craft? I couldn’t believe it all. I analyzed film documents from the news channels with the help of the modest computer from my recon craft...and failed to prove even one of these She’pron prophecies to be untrue. The *Aetron* really was gone. Crest had been freed in the meantime, and Thora had already left the solar system again—a few tontas before I returned.”

Rico registered that the temperature of Quiniu’s left hand had dropped by several degrees celsius. Telling her story had triggered an interesting psychosomatic reaction. He decided not to mention it. Instead he waited for her to finally reveal to him her theory about his existence. Until now she had only spoken about herself.

“Larsaf,” he said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The original name for this solar system is Larsaf.”

“Whose original name for it?” the colonial Arkonide asked.

Rico looked at her probingly. “The eternal Arkonide Empire. It seems this knowledge was lost over time. Or people simply did not want to remember it.”

“Why do you say that?” Soptor asked.

“It’s not important,” Rico replied. “Please, continue with your story!”

“A few tontas,” Quiniu Soptor repeated. “They had decided to leave me stranded as the last Arkonide in this system, with a recon craft that was only capable of interplanetary travel.”

“What about Crest?” Rico asked. “Did he also leave the solar system?”

“No, he didn’t. But he has allied himself with the humans. They placed him before a court and were very close to murdering him.”

“But they didn’t do it,” Rico emphasized.

“They could change their minds at any time, if you ask me. I don’t trust these humans anymore.” She laid her hand on the tabletop. “Strangely enough, bad news doesn’t put me into a state of shock. Instead, I saw an opportunity to continue my transformation, my *process of becoming*, that had begun in the chaos of Venus’s atmosphere.”

Rico nodded because he didn’t know what to say to that. It seemed to him that there must have been far-reaching changes in Arkonide society. That was the only logical explanation for her story. In the past, in *her* time, solo missions and tests had been part of the basic training of every interstellar traveler. And why had she so strangely stressed the meaning of Crest’s gender and lineage?

“I concentrated on the images of the auxiliary craft that Thora had used to come to the third planet,” she continued. “It had certain features that indicated it was built by Arkonides, but it was also unfamiliar and bulky, and badly damaged. I assumed that it really was an Arkonide ship—a kind of museum piece—and not an alien vessel. Therefore, there had to be an ancient Arkinide station on the second planet that had classified our recon craft as hostile. And that’s where you come in, Rico.”

“Me?”

“You looked like an Arkonide but did not belong to the crew of the *Aetron*—for which you have far too much initiative, by the way. So you must be from the forgotten Arkonide station on the second planet.” Quiniu’s fingers gripped his wrist more tightly. “Did you attack us or did the systems do it automatically? And why were our recon craft classified as hostile while a Fantan ship can maneuver freely in this system?”

“I... I don’t know. Maybe the station you are speaking of was destroyed as well. Like the *Aetron*. Or it’s waiting for the right moment to intervene.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you don’t know for sure?”

“Why should I?”

“Because you come from there, from that fortress, Rico. Because you came to Earth with Thora in the auxiliary craft I was talking about, and—if the reports from Earth can be trusted—were killed in a fight against Clifford Monterny, a man with parapsychic powers. It’s very strange, however, that neither Thora nor Crest held a funeral ceremony for the Arkonide who was killed. And even stranger is the fact that those from Terrania who were responsible secretly carried out a manhunt over the past few days. I am almost certain that you are the prey they are looking for.”

“Your theory is based on too many assumptions, Quiniu Soptor,” Rico said slowly. “Why should anyone go to such measures to catch me?”

She looked over at the cement factory workers, scrutinizing them. They were still eating silently, paying no attention to the two strangers among them. Or at least they did not do so openly.

“Every single one of us is extremely valuable to the humans,” Quiniu whispered. “And apart from that, you’re not an Arkonide.”

He looked at his plate. He hadn’t touched the fish. It was looking at Rico out of its blind white eyes. Accusingly, it seemed to him.

The very weathered sign in front of the fenced-in restaurant had promised “freshly caught fish”, although nine-tenths of all fish eaten had come from giant fish factories for decades now. At the Bohai Sea and in the Yellow Sea next to it, there was a wide area of water that was low in oxygen in which few fish could survive.

Rico shook his head, the movement barely discernible. Strange that he could access completely useless information without a problem while other, far more important information remained hidden somewhere, unavailable to him.

“Even if everything you said is correct,” he replied in a flat tone of voice. “What do you want from me? Why did you want to make contact with me at all costs? Why are we sitting here?”

Quiniu turned up the hydrothermal regulator at the edge of the plate up higher, waited a few seconds, and then put another portion of steaming fish into her mouth. Still chewing, she said, “I was hungry.”

Rico didn’t answer.

The woman pointed her fork at him. “You have a goal, my dear. I guess you want to get away from here. That connects us. I want to get away from here too.”

“A bold decision. Why don’t you attach yourself to the Fantan? They own the only interstellar ship in the Larsaf System.”

“Are you crazy? I don’t want to end up being Besun!”

Rico shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t even know who I am. I

can't be much help to you."

Quiniu put down her fork and looked at him as if she were seeing his face for the very first time. The lights from the pier were reflected in her silver irises.

"I know that for some reason you are unable to access your full intellect. Despite that, you are very driven. You are seeking something in the sea. I assume it is a hidden spaceship, which is why you wanted to come to the sea. *Into* the sea."

Rico thought about *him*. "That seems a little far-fetched to me, as the humans say. However, I can't completely rule it out."

His companion smiled enigmatically. "And if it really is about a spaceship, then it is anchored very, very deep on the ocean floor."

"And you can reach the bottom?"

"Perhaps. I want to show you something. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Quiniu stood up. She blinked. At the same time a hissing sound emerged, as if a rainshower were coming closer. Something dark moved in front of the illuminated silhouette of the cement factory. As it flew away again, he saw that it was a lenticular flying device with a transparent cockpit.

The four workers jumped up from their chairs, screaming. Guests and staff ran out of the interior of the small building, pointing excitedly at the dark shape.

"Your recon craft," Rico said.

"It's not a submarine," she replied, "but I would be willing to try my luck with it if you are!"

He thought of *him* again and nodded.

Quiniu turned on her heel, giggling, and opened the shoulder straps of her dress, which slid to the floor. She wore nothing below

but her skin. Her *artificial* skin.

She reached towards the skin where it was split open on her chest, and while the restaurant visitors screamed hysterically, she ripped it from her body and released her head from it.

Rico watched, fascinated, as he saw that instead of hair, she had small red feathers on her head, although, when he looked more closely, he realized they were part of an elaborate hood. Her black body shone in an oily blue hue.

She stretched as if she had been sitting for hours. “What a lovely warm evening,” she said. “Perfect for a romantic trip for two.”

A corpulent Chinese man, whose hat revealed that he was a chef, and two of the factory workers, ran towards Quiniu Soptor. From the screams around him, Rico heard the words *Karruppan* and *Ah Gong!*—Malayan for “black man” and “disturbed spirit!”

Rico automatically went into a defense position while Quiniu Soptor let the strips of skin fall down before countering the attackers with a smooth leap straight off the ground. She twisted in the air, kicked her legs upward, hitting the long butcher knife out of the chef’s hand, and used him to roll over by grabbing his shoulder and using it as traction to pull herself around.

As she fell, she kicked the Malaysian man in the side with her heel. The chef collapsed with a loud thud onto the sandy boardwalk. The factory worker also collapsed with a loud whistling sound. Before he could gasp for air, Quiniu rolled away and jumped up again. She grabbed his right arm and twisted it out of the shoulder joint. With a muffled gasp he landed on the ground next to the chef and didn’t move again.

Everyone else present shied away from them in fear.

Rico looked in amazement at the oily, gleaming, blueish-black figure before him. “Was that really necessary?” he asked.

“I had the urgent need to move before we embark on our trip.” She stroked her hand across her naked breast and looked at Rico

provokingly. All he could see were silver eyes and white teeth. “You don’t seem to be particularly interested in my bodily charms,” she commented.

The recon craft hovered downwards with its door open. Quiniu winked cheekily at Rico and jumped inside. The two Asian men gasped on the wooden boards of the pier.

Quiniu appeared again and pointed to the skin she had removed that was lying on the ground. A turquoise-colored ray suddenly appeared between her hand and the ground, and then the skin was gone.

“Are you coming?”

Rico looked one last time at their audience, all of whom were frozen in a state of shock, a state he should be in too.

He nodded.

4.

Tako Kakuta

Ferrol

The lizards brought them—no, *herded* them into a field on the other side of the hospital. Vega burned relentlessly in the sky, making the air shimmer, turning their new masters into nightmarish figures.

Like cattle, Kakuta thought bitterly. *That's how they treat us.*

He had not counted the prisoners, but he estimated there to be between sixty and seventy Ferrons—doctors, nurses, the sick and the healthy. Then there were five humans—himself, Anne Sloane, Rod Nyssen, Darya Morozova, and the recovering Conrad Deringhouse.

Kakuta stumbled several times as he supported a Ferron man with one leg who had lost his crutches in the havoc. The man was about two hand widths shorter than Kakuta, but he seemed to weigh a ton.

Kakuta was having problems coping with the forty-percent-higher gravity, the thick air, which was difficult to breathe, the strong UV rays of the sun, the stench, and the complaining of the other prisoners.

Rivulets of sweat were running down his face. He was constantly wiping it away with his sleeve surreptitiously in hopes that nobody would notice. Ferrons cooled themselves by spitting. Kakuta, however, was sweating like a pig, as were his other human companions,

They had found out from the Ferron woman, Fajon, who was bound to a wheelchair, that the lizards thought the humans were also Ferrons despite the fact that their skin was very different to the usual blue tone. Apparently, there were several Ferron peoples on the outer planets and moons in the Vega system who differed both

visually and culturally from those who lived on the main world. But continuously losing water through the skin pores was not typical for Ferrons, and if a Topsidan noticed this, it would betray them. Tako Kakuta didn't know what would happen then, but he assumed that it would not be to their advantage.

Fajon and her men had called them the "bringers of the light," figures from their legends and fairy tales who would come to rescue them one day. The lizard-like Topsidans would no doubt give them much less respect.

Kakuta looked up and searched for the heads of his companions among the mostly copper-colored hair of the Ferrons. He located Sloane's dark hair and Nyssen's unmistakable skull. Darya Morozova stood much taller than most Ferrons at one meter eighty. She had tied a dirty cloth around her pitch-black hair so that she didn't stand out even more.

Good, Darya.

Kakuta could not see Conrad Deringhouse in the crowd, but he knew that the injured former astronaut was lying on a stretcher being carried by two strong Ferrons. Hom-Aut, the doctor, had vehemently insisted on operating on his patient, and he would have died if the Topsidan with the striking red eye patch had not turned up and insisted that the operation be completed. "The wise one," the other Topsidans had called him. He was the only one of the lizard beings that had shown the slightest ounce of humanity so far.

Kakuta had to laugh. *Humanity,* he thought bitterly. *What makes you demand humanity, of all things, from the Topsidans? Apart from anything else, how many news reports have you seen from all over the world that showed humans behaving even more brutally than these ?*

He looked thoughtfully at the lizard beings. They held their rayguns casually at their sides, but Tako Kakuta knew that some of them were just waiting for one of the prisoners to do something stupid.

When the Topsidans had taken control of the hospital—a Ferron healing center and place of encounter for both the healthy and the

sick—they had reacted to the desperate attempts by individual Ferrons to defend themselves with relentless violence.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. This damned heat! Kakuta thought about Kanso, a Japanese art very similar to Feng Shui, and searched for inner balance and the calm he needed to cope with the situation.

“Stop!” a demanding voice suddenly shouted out. “Wait!”

Kakuta looked around and asked a healthy Ferron who was carrying nothing if the man could look after the patient with one leg. Then he pushed his way through the crowd of waiting people until he was standing next to his companions.

“Where were you?” Anne Sloane whispered angrily. You know how much we need you!”

Nyssen came over to her side and laid his hand on her arm in an attempt to calm her down. “Not so loud, Anne!” he said.

Kakuta made a light bow. “I had to help a man who was unable to walk alone.”

Darya Morozova came closer to him. “What should we do now?” she asked quietly. “If I understood the Topsidan’s hand signal correctly, we’re about to be picked up by some kind of transport.”

“Our lives are not immediately in danger,” Kakuta answered, just as quietly.

They were speaking English and the translators were switched off, but it was still important not to draw any unnecessary attention. “We’ll continue to act as if we’re normal Ferron prisoners. Sooner or later an opportunity will present itself.”

“Sooner or later!” Sloane said bitterly. “You are a teleporter, so you could bring us out of reach of the Topsidan weapons right now!”

“He can’t, Anne,” Nyssen said gently. “He would have to jump several times to get all of us away from here. We wouldn’t get any

farther than a few hundred meters. That's not enough. Not to mention Deringhouse. He..."

"Are you on his side now?"

Kakuta gave her a short, irritated look. Her questions made it sound like she felt personally insulted by Nyssen's statement. *Or disappointed?*

"We're a group," Kakuta said emphatically. "We must stick together. That's the only way we can get through this situation. Rod's right. Apart from the fact that I don't know where I could jump to, it wouldn't do much to improve our situation. We would still be somewhere close to the Topsidans and would be in real trouble if they found us again."

Sloane pressed her lips together. She had obviously decided it would be better not to say anything more for the time being. Kakuta took a deep breath. The conflict that had emerged between him and the telekinetic still continued, even in this difficult situation.

They suddenly heard a whistling sound. Many of the prisoners turned their heads to where it was coming from. A couple of seconds later, a rotund monstrosity landed. It hissed, groaned, and whistled as it set down.

"What's that?" Nyssen asked.

"I haven't got a clue, but it looks like it might be driven by hydropower," Morozova said.

"Nonsense," Nyssen responded, as he looked upwards.

Kakuta said nothing. But he knew why Morozova had come to that conclusion. The rust-brown transporter measured around eighty meters at its broadest, and was thirty meters high. It resembled a filled fruit bowl turned upside down. The hemispherical shape of the upper part looked smooth but didn't have a reflective surface. The lower part was made up of a large number of rounded objects in different sizes and shapes. Fountains of steam shot out of the place where the "bowl" and the "fruit"

joined.

It slowly dropped to the ground covering Vega, remaining for about twenty minutes above their heads. Kakuta wiped the sweat from his face, grateful for the shade it afforded.

“Those spherical bits,” Sloane said slowly. “They’re the engines. Look at them!”

“They’re transport containers!” Morozova murmured. “Some of them are transparent and—”

“Filled with other prisoners,” Nyssen added.

There was suddenly a tumult in the crowd of Ferrons and humans. Several people screamed. Right after that, a group of them floated into the air. Above them, an opening appeared in one of the rounded shapes, which seemed to suck them in before it closed.

“They’re picking them up and bringing them into the transporter using tractor beams!” Sloane called out.

“Hurry!” Kakuta ordered. He had decided to first of all ignore the strangeness of these invisible beams and to put off wondering about this mysterious world until he had time for it. “We must stay as close together as possible. We have to make sure we don’t get separated!”

Nyssen and Morozova reacted immediately. Without a word, they went to the stretcher carrying Deringhouse and relieved the two Ferrons who had been carrying him up until now. Sloane and Kakuta took their places, she on the right and he on the left.

Fajon rolled up, followed closely by her men. She also joined the humans. The Ferron woman looked at Kakuta and nodded. She still believed the humans were these “bringers of the light” who would protect them against harm. Kakuta nodded back, trying to look as confident as possible.

With his heart beating hard against his chest, he waited for the beam to reach them and lift them into the air. He looked at Anne Sloane. She looked back with an accusing look on her face, but said

nothing.

The flight across the countryside of Ferrol showed them the extent of the fighting and destruction. The farther they moved from the mountains, the more extensive the Topsidan ground offensive showed itself to be.

From an altitude of about a hundred meters, they saw armored hover vehicles flying over villages and towns, shooting everything they encountered that looked as if it might be part of military facilities. Entire settlements went up in flames. Ferrons could be seen running for their lives, some of them fleeing in vehicles. There was soon chaos on the narrow streets. Everyone wanted to escape but often ended up in even worse situations as the Topsidans seemed to be everywhere. Cigar-shaped troop transporters landed, spitting out an ever-increasing number of lizard-like figures.

In some places, the Ferrons were better organized. They actually did have military facilities. Forts, tanks, guns, which they were pulling out of concealed hatches in the ground as fast as they could in order to open fire on their attackers.

Their efforts had little success. The Topsidans had come to conquer their planet. They were prepared to deal with resistance and reacted accordingly. Whenever guns were deployed, they reacted by shooting beams from orbit. Wherever soldiers countered their attackers with weapons, the lizards pulled out their battle gliders and mowed down everything that got in the way of their guns.

The Ferrons fought courageously, but they didn't have a chance against the aggressors. Ferron successes were few and far between and usually came at a very high price.

Fajon was sitting in her vehicle, visibly shaken. One of her men, Bijoiu, was kneeling next to her, squeezing her hand. The other Ferrons and humans, who had nothing else to do, were standing or sitting silently around the transparent hatch in the floor. Every now and then weeping could be heard, or an angry gasp, or sighing. However, not a word was spoken. They were the silent witnesses of a world sinking into war.

Kakuta had seen enough, and he went to the rear of the transport sphere where the sick and those in need of help had been brought. A few auxiliaries took care of them, giving them fluids that they drew from rusty drink dispensers, washing their wounds or spending a moment talking to them.

The teleporter dropped down next to the stretcher on which Conrad Deringhouse was sitting. The man had been one of the astronauts aboard the *Starchild*, which had flown to the moon and destroyed the *Aetron*. Born in 2012, he was a lanky boy who was able to push aside any moments of sadness or desperation thanks to his natural carefree attitude towards life. He looked pale, almost deathly so. He had lost a lot of blood, perhaps too much. But the doctor, Hom-Aut, had assured them that, for the moment, his life was out of danger.

For the moment.

Kakuta hoped they would be able to overcome the worst of the crisis as soon as Deringhouse was finally himself again.

Sloane and Nyssen made their way through the crowd, with Morozova right on their heels.

“We have to talk with you!” Sloane said.

Kakuta nodded. He indicated the darkened area where the box-shaped sanitary containers, which they could use if they needed to relieve themselves, were standing. Until now, none of them had had to use them, apart from an old Ferron man, for whom the excitement and the terrible scenes had been too much, making him throw up in them.

“You want to persuade me to flee, don’t you? Kakuta asked before Sloane could say anything. “I’m right, am I not?”

“Yes,” she answered. “We don’t know what the Topsidans intend to do with us, but we can assume that it isn’t going to be pleasant. We are in the middle of a war! They are not likely to show prisoners much mercy. They will probably torture us, put us in a work camp, or...who knows what...” she said, looking for other

examples of terrible things that might happen to them.

She has no doubt compiled a list in her head, the teleporter considered, *but she can no longer remember everything on it.*

"Or they'll do experiments on us. Use us as human shields and so on!" Sloane continued hastily. "Anything is possible. They have a completely different mentality from us. We've seen what the lizards are like—cold and unscrupulous. Just look at the battles going on and you have to admit I'm right!"

Kakuta nodded. "War always causes many victims," he said cautiously. "But we have also encountered a few who did not allow innocent people to die, who even *ordered* that Conrad's life be saved." He looked briefly at their faces. "And, anyway, who are we? We were Americans, Russians, or Chinese. Look how we emphasized our differences for decades, for centuries, even. We generalized, pointed our fingers accusingly at every failing we discovered on the other side, no matter how small. And now we are all Terrans; we are all on the same side!"

"Nothing but empty words," Sloane countered. "Tell that to the Ferrons over there, who have to look on as their world is destroyed!"

"You're right," he said. "But my thoughts on this have not changed since we were transported. I could jump from the ground with two of you and then return to get the other two. But that would be four jumps within a few seconds. And anyway, I've not had enough time to recover properly. Even if I managed it, the probability of me landing in the wrong place during the second jump is too great. We would become separated..."

"Does that mean you are too weak and unconcentrated to rescue us?" Sloane surmised coolly.

The teleporter looked briefly at his feet, then lifted his head again and looked her straight in the eye. "Yes, I am," he admitted. "And we can't forget Conrad. If we jump with him in the middle of this war zone, his chances of survival would sink drastically. None of us can guarantee that we can protect his life."

“We could at least try.”

Kakuta took a deep breath in and out. Then he said, “You say you want us to flee because we don’t know how dangerous it will be for us wherever they are taking us. But it’s just as uncertain and dangerous to jump right into a conflict zone.” He looked at his companions one after the other. “And there’s another thing we mustn’t forget. Fajon and her men rescued us when we were in great danger. If we try to get to safety, we can’t just leave them behind. We owe them that.”

Sloane looked from Morozova to Nyssen. Morozova said nothing. When Nyssen took a deep breath before speaking, a sense of fear began to creep over Kakuta. He had an uneasy feeling that Sloane and Nyssen were quite close. If the astronaut took her side, that would put Kakuta in an awkward situation.

“I can understand why Anne is worried,” Nyssen said slowly. “But I understand Tako’s position as well. If he says he isn’t strong enough to jump all of us to a safe hiding place, then I respect that. And, he’s right, we can’t leave Fajon and her people behind. And there are selfish reasons for that too. They know their way around here and they want to help us—I don’t think we could find a helpful combination like that on such short notice anywhere else.”

Kakuta felt a sense of relief. He was neither the charismatic leader type who could motivate others, nor was he a particularly good leader who could argue in such a persuasive manner that he was able to knock out those who didn’t agree with him. He saw Anne Sloane’s resistance break down when she heard what Nyssen had to say about it.

“The more time we have, the better,” Kakuta said quietly. “The stronger I become, the greater the chances are that any escape attempt will be successful.”

“Okay,” Sloane said after a slight hesitation. “But you are responsible for what happens!”

She turned around and went.

After flying for several hours, the transporter finally landed on the huge concrete field of a Ferron spaceport. It was covered with the ruins of Ferron spaceships. And prisoners. It looked like tens of thousands were crowding into individual sectors on the landing area.

As the transporter descended slowly, the humans grouped together around Deringhouse's stretcher, as they had already done before being transported. The transport spheres were released and floated to different parts of the spaceport. Then they opened and tractor beams caught their group, setting them down on the landing area.

Fajon and her men landed only a few meters away from the humans. Fajon rolled towards them but then froze on the spot as if she had run up against an invisible wall.

The air between the Ferrons and the humans suddenly began to flicker.

"An energy field!" Nyssen gasped.

"Help us!" Fajon said. "We don't want to be separated from you!"

Kakuta felt a sense of helplessness descend on him. Even if he managed to overcome this wall of energy using teleportation, he would reveal his powers to everyone around them. They would have lost their most important trump card. He lowered his eyes, ashamed, because he couldn't bear looking at Fajon's disappointed face any longer.

As the energy fields then shifted and Fajon and her men were whisked away, Kakuta felt relieved. However, this feeling of relief only made his feelings of shame even stronger.

The Topsidans moved the groups around using the walls of energy between them, bringing them into a waiting transport spaceship.

While they were entering the ship, Kakuta felt Sloane's eyes on

him. He looked up to see her staring icily at him.

5.

Bernhard Frank

Great Russia, July 29, 2036

The news that aliens who called themselves “Fantan” had appeared was met with a mixture of horror and an adventurous anticipation on the Trans-Siberian railway, but the latter only among the travelers.

Bernhard wasn’t quite sure what he should think about the Fantan. Were they something to be scared of or did they represent nothing more than an ultimate turning point in human history, letting humanity know that it had finally arrived in the future? The fact that the Arkonides had arrived might have been just a coincidence, but it was now clear that the Earth was firmly on the Milky Way map.

Some travelers were gripped by panic and started calling their relatives at home. Others were glued to their pods for hours on end, breathing in every single photo, article, and comment about the aliens.

Bernhard and Caroline mostly sat in the restaurant car at two window seats talking about Rhodan, the Fantan, and how the world would change in the coming days, weeks, months, and years.

While they spoke, the beautiful Russian countryside sped by outside the window.

“Look how wild and unspoiled the world is here,” Bernhard said. It was the afternoon of July 29. “Why do we always strive to reach the stars when we haven’t even traveled much of our own planet?”

“You’re right, Paps,” Caroline said, staring out the window with a dreamy look on her face.

They had left the train station in Krasnoyarsk at lunchtime and were now on their way to their next intermediate destination, Uyar.

This meant their journey on the Transsib was slowly coming to an end. They would disembark in Irkutsk and then continue on Frank's electric chopper in a southerly direction. The chopper had already brought them to Moscow, where it had been loaded into the Transsib's freight car.

Since then, the father and daughter had been enjoying the pleasures of traveling that were the privilege of people who had enough time and money to enjoy the wonderful services and ambience of the luxury class. There would have been simpler and faster ways to get from Munich to the Gobi, but Bernhard knew why Caroline had asked to take this route. In doing so, she wanted to delay the time she would have to say goodbye to her father and enjoy their time together.

The farewell from Angelica had been hard. Caroline didn't quite know how to tell her mother gently that she was not only going to join Rhodan in the desert but that she also wanted to embark on the journey there with her father alone.

Surprisingly, Angelica had reacted positively after recovering from her initial surprise. A few tears had been shed, but she didn't say anything negative and she refrained from any attempt to try to talk Caroline out of pursuing her plan.

"Parents should give their children both roots and wings," she had said. "You will hopefully always know where your roots are, no matter how far your wings take you."

Bernhard had cried at that, suddenly seeing Angelica in a very different light. After that, they had purchased the last few items needed for their journey before visiting one of Caroline's sisters, Alexandra, who worked as a kindergarten teacher in a suburb of Munich. She also had a mostly positive reaction to the news.

"Take a look around, and if you find a handsome young astronaut, let me know," she had said, laughing.

They had only been able to reach Johanna, Bernhard and Anjelica's middle daughter, on her pod. She was the only one of the three sisters who had fun with all the money they had received

from their father. She was now a celebrated “it girl,” jetsetter, and photos of her could be found in nearly every glossy magazine. She was currently visiting her new boyfriend on his film set in South Africa. She had cried at first, then promised to come and visit Caroline if she promised to introduce her to Rhodan.

They’d then loaded the chopper and set off on their adventure together.

“Excuse me,” a voice saíd in smooth English. “Is this seat free?”

Bernhard was startled out of his reverie. He looked up to see a slightly overweight man of about fifty. He was wearing a blue shirt and brown pants, holding a paper notebook and a pencil case in his hands.

While Bernhard asked himself, a little perturbed by the situation, what it was about this man that annoyed him, Caroline pulled aside a chair and said to the stranger, “Please take a seat. It’s nice of you to join us.”

She introduced her father and herself to the man, who was called Geoffrey Thistlenette and came from England.

“Do you like traveling, Mr. Thistlenette?” Caroline asked. “Why are you on the Transsib?”

“I think I’m here for the same reason as many others,” Thistlenette said. He stared at a point behind Bernhard. “I want to see Rhodan. Speak to him. Listen to what he has to say and see how far-reaching this vision he supposedly has really is.”

Bernhard fidgeted in his chair. There was something he didn’t like about this man, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Caroline didn’t seem to have any such reservations. She chatted away with him, explaining that she felt the same way and that she would also like to see Rhodan up close in order to see whether she would like to stay longer in Terrania.

Bernhard switched off, only half-listening to what was being said, studying the menu instead.

After Caroline had explained what her job had been until only a few days ago, Thistlenette asked Frank what he worked as.

“I no longer work,” Bernhard said. “I used to be an IT specialist, but now I’m…well, you might say, I’m a connoisseur of life.” He looked at the menu again.

“And what do you work as?” Caroline asked.

“I draw,” the man said. “Mostly portraits. Nothing special.”

“Can I see one?”

Thistlenette placed a hand over his paper notebook. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “I only show my pictures when I’m ready to.”

Bernhard looked up. He frowned and tried to figure out what it was about the man that annoyed him. Thistlenette actually had quite a pleasant manner that inspired confidence—but there was something about his eyes that unsettled Bernhard.

“Would you draw me?” Caroline asked. “I’ll pay you, of course.”

“I’d love to draw you,” Thistlenette answered. “But you can put your wallet away. I don’t take any money for my work.”

Bernhard gave the man a furtive look. How was Thistlenette supposed to earn a living drawing portraits if he didn’t charge any money for them?

He ordered a beer from the waiter and waited for it to be served fresh and chilled before taking a large sip and then turning to look out the window. Geoffrey Thistlenette had spread out his pencils and erasers on the table in front of him and had started on the portrait of Caroline. The strange thing was, he didn’t look at her once while drawing.

The train trundled onward. Glasses clinked on the table next to them, and the tip of Thistlenette’s pencil scratched across the paper.

“May I ask you something, Mr. Frank?” Thistlenette suddenly said.

Bernhard winced. He looked up and noticed that the man was still not looking directly at him. “Ask away!”

“Would you prefer that I sit at another table”

Frank’s face turned red. “No, of course not,” he said far too hastily. “What makes you think that?”

By God, he thought at the same time. *There’s something creepy about you. I don’t like it when people don’t look me in the eye when they talk to me!*

“Oh,” Thistlenette said. “No special reason.”

With that, the conversation was over. But Frank couldn’t get it out of his head. If he only knew what it was about the man that disturbed him so much!

Time passed, and the portrait slowly took shape. The train entered a tunnel, and everything went dark. That had happened already over the past few days—the train lights had failed to come on despite the fact that they were traveling through a tunnel. A few of the passengers had already complained bitterly about it.

It didn’t bother Bernhard. It was a little spooky but certainly not a very annoying problem, as some passengers tried to suggest.

The train trundled gently onward, the glasses clinking to the rhythm of its movements. And...

Bernhard winced, startled by a sudden realization. He could not only hear the glasses on the table next to them as they rattled against one another—he could also hear the graphite tip of the pencil as it continued to scratch across the paper. Thistlenette was drawing the entire time despite the fact that it was so dark you couldn’t even see your hand ten centimeters in front of your eyes!

Shortly after that, the train shot out of the tunnel. Deeply unsettled, Bernhard looked at Thistlenette. The artist was now looking him directly in the eye—for the first time since he had sat down. And he continued drawing the entire time. Uninterruptedly, with strong, confident strokes of the pencil.

“You’re blind, Mr. Thistlenette,” Frank suddenly blurted out, dumbfounded.

“Does it bother you?” Thistlenette asked him.

“But…how can you draw if you can’t see anything?!”

The corners of the man’s mouth turned upward into a smile. “Since when have we required eyes to see?” he asked. “To be perfectly honest, they rather get in the way.”

Bernhard overcame his sense of shock and bent forward slightly. “Do… Do you have a special…talent?”

“I’m apparently not the only one at this table who does,” Thistlenette replied.

Before Bernhard or his daughter could answer, the train entered the next tunnel. Fifteen seconds later the lights surprisingly came on.

“He’s gone,” Caroline blurted out.

Frank looked around, but could not see the man anywhere. “Now I have a guilty conscience,” he said. “I was rude to him and didn’t have a chance to apologize.”

“You were annoyed because he didn’t look you in the eyes, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I was at first too,” Caroline admitted. “But at the same time I felt he was someone I could trust, that there was a connection.”

Bernhard hesitated, then pointed at the sheet of paper lying before them on the table. Caroline’s portrait.

“He’s left it lying there.”

Caroline picked it up. “I don’t believe it,” she said, taken aback. “My grandparents!”

Frank frowned and picked up the piece of paper. It was true, Thistlenette had not only drawn Caroline. In the background, he had drawn the faces of Frank's parents, Caroline's grandparents, using only a few strokes of the pencil. They were no longer alive, having passed away a few years ago, one shortly after the other, at the end of a full life.

"How could he have drawn them?" Frank asked. "He didn't even know them."

Caroline looked at him. "His special power. He can look into people in a way that others can't."

"And he can see even though he's blind," Frank added. "I hope we meet him again before we get out in Irkutsk so that I can apologize."

Caroline took his hand. "I would also like to talk to him. There are thousands of questions about his special talent I would love to ask. It's the first time I've met someone who is also…*different.* But I don't think that we'll see him again. Otherwise he would not have just snuck away like that. He doesn't want to talk about things before he's with Rhodan. At least, that's the way it seemed to me."

"But he should know that I'm sorry about the way I treated him."

"Paps," Caroline said gently. "If he really can look into us, then he knows you didn't mean it in a bad way, that you were just a little unsure of the situation."

Bernhard sighed. "You're right."

Caroline grabbed the menu. "You've been looking at that long enough, so what are we going to order?"

6.

Reginald Bull

The Fantan Ship

He felt as if he was carrying a ton of weight, and that the pain was pushing its way along his nerve paths into his fingertips and toes. The smallest movement hurt, and every breath he took was sheer torture. He wished that the pleasant darkness, the caress of sleep would return. Instead, every single cell in his body felt like it was ablaze with burning hot pain.

Bull pressed his lips together. He wanted to scream but managed to hold it in at the last moment. The pain might be torture to him, and it might rob him of his ability to act—but scream, no, that he would not do. With a massive act of willpower, he managed to turn onto his back. Somewhere above him, a metallic sky appeared.

The ceiling of the loading area. Image by image, episode by episode, everything that had happened and that brought him to this situation came to mind.

Somewhere close by he heard a low murmur. “Ossa longa: Femur, Tibia, Fibula, Humerus, Ulna, Radius. Ossa plana: Cranium …”

Bull gasped. A few of the Latin words were familiar to him. He thought things over briefly and then came to the conclusion that all of the terms had to be the names of bones in the body. “Ossa longa” meant “long bone,” which was part of the upper thigh but also the ulna and radius. And “cranium” was the Latin name for the skull.

Manoli was listing the human bones. The doc didn’t seem to be doing much better than himself.

“Eric!” Bull managed to whisper.

No answer. Manoli stubbornly listed the bones of the human skeleton. He would be busy for a while, as humans had more than

206 bones, although, presumably Manoli would not name every single rib.

Playing little games in his head like this helped Bull to keep his mind, to some extent, off the pain that was coursing through his body. He managed to lift both hands to his head. His face felt cold and sweaty beneath his itching fingertips. A question popped into his head. *What happened?*

They had managed together to bring Sid back to life. Only seconds later, he had been hit by something huge, which had felt as if someone had used all their strength to hit him in the back of the head with a baseball bat.

Bull concentrated and sat up straight with a single, terrible contraction of his stomach muscles. Stars appeared before his eyes. He took a deep breath and realized to his relief that the pain was slowly receding. The more he moved, the faster it faded. It was as if he had to free every single part of his body part by part. *Yes, that's better—now I've got you back. I release you from pain.*

Eric, Sue, and Sid were lying next to him. Manoli was curled up in the fetal position next to the defibrillator, while Sue's head rested on Sid's shoulder and upper arm. The girl's body twitched, and she groaned quietly.

Bull was suddenly gripped by fear as he realized that Sid had not moved since his resuscitation. He was lying there just the way he had before! Then, relieved, he saw that Sid's chest was rising and falling at regular intervals.

Bull let out the air he had been holding in. He didn't dare think about what might have happened if the hit to his head that had knocked them all out had come a minute earlier, before Manoli had activated the defibrillator a second time.

"Reg?" Manoli said weakly. "What happened?"

"I don't know. Something knocked us off our feet."

"How are you?"

“Better than I was a few minutes ago,” he answered. “My neck and my arms hurt like hell. And my head is pounding like a bell being hammered by a huge mallet.”

“It must be a kind of shock,” the doctor murmured. “From a giant energy field or something similar.” He sat up, groaning as he moved.

“It was the transition shock,” a voice very near to Bull said. “You’ll survive it. The next one won’t feel quite as bad.”

Bull turned his head, moaning with the effort. It was the first time he had noticed the Fantan hovering on a platform less than five meters away. There were a number of pots and pans in front of him.

Bull recognized the alien by his missing limbs. It was Skelir.

“That was the physical shock that occurs when a spaceship transitions?” Bull asked in disbelief. Crest had told him about it. He had never expected the pain to be this bad.

“I can give you some peace of mind. You get used to it. After a dozen transitions, you only feel a slight tension. That’s what it’s been like for all living beings so far.” The Fantan seemed to hesitate. Then he pointed one of his limbs at Sid. “What’s wrong with him? Is he dead?”

The boy was the only one of them who hadn’t moved yet. Sue had laid her hand over her eyes and was weeping quietly. The stump of her left arm was waving in the air, as if it did not belong to the rest of her body.

Bull opened his mouth to answer Skelir, but Manoli beat him to it.

“Sid is alive. But he’s having a hard time coping with the transition shock.”

“Why?”

“He’s a very sensitive soul.”

“That was the Besun who wasn’t feeling very well before the transition?” Skelir asked. “The one you damaged and even stole a Besun for?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll be in trouble because of that!”

“I’m sorry.”

Bull was relieved that Skelir did not want to know exactly why Sid was having a harder time than Eric, Sue, and himself. Sid’s powers as a teleporter must be kept secret from the Fantan for as long as possible. It might save their lives one day.

“I will have to give them another Besun to compensate for the damage!” Skelir complained. “It’ll be expensive!”

“I’m really sorry about that,” Bull said. Skelir’s self-pity was starting to get on his nerves. “But I am much more interested in something else at the moment.”

“Yes?”

“If that was a transition, does that mean we have left our home system?”

“Yes, it does.”

“You kidnapped us. You had no right to do that!”

“You are Besun. Besun have no rights.”

Sue finally sat up. Her eyes were wet with tears. Fearfully, she looked from Sid to Manoli, then to him. Bull felt his face become red with anger.

“I demand that you take us back *immediately*!”

The Fantan pointed towards the pots and pans. “I have brought you food. According to our list, you should be able to digest it.”

Bull rolled onto his knees, supported himself with his hands, and then stood up slowly until he was standing in front of the Fantan at his full height. Unfortunately, Skelir was sitting on his platform, which placed him a good fifteen centimeters higher than Bull.

"I want to know immediately what you intend to do with us! Where are you taking us?"

Skelir clumsily unloaded the pots and cartons onto the floor of the storeroom. "You really should eat and drink something," he said. "It wouldn't be good if you died."

"Answer my question!" Bull ordered in a loud voice.

What's the use of being polite now? he thought. They had already been kidnapped, and that changed the diplomatic circumstances considerably.

The Fantan straightened up. "You are Besun. For you, no one place is better than any other. But don't worry, we look after Besun well. You are in very good hands with us!"

Skelir pulled a lever that was about as long as an arm, and the platform hovered about twenty centimeters higher. The Fantan obviously considered their meeting to be over.

Bull wanted to say something, but all that came out was a dry cough. Before his mind's eye he saw a giant ornamental case and a Fantan extremity placing him in it as if he were a collector's item.

We look after our lovely Besun well. Even red-haired, scarred, and slightly stout Besun.

Skelir turned the platform and floated slowly out of the storeroom.

Sue sat up straight. "Please!" she said quietly. "Where are you taking us?"

A tremor went through the Fantan. The platform stopped. Scuttling on three extremities, Skelir turned around.

“To Myranar,” he said. “We’re bringing you to Myranar.”

“What’s that?” Sue asked. “A planet?”

“You will soon see, Sue Mirafiore,” the Fantan answered.

Was Bull mistaken or could he hear a certain undertone in the extraterrestrial’s voice that wasn’t there before? A certain timbre. *Warmth?*

Bull frowned. He would have to stop assigning human characteristics to every alien that crossed his path. It would no doubt get him into hot water one day.

The Fantan grabbed the steering lever again and glided out of the storeroom.

“Then that’s clear,” Manoli said drily as he collected the medical equipment lying on the ground. “We’re flying to Myranar. I’ve been wanting to go there for a long time.”

Bull slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand. “These damned cylinder people,” he cursed.

“Myranar,” Sid said quietly. “One place is as good or bad as any other. But we’re not intending to stay there long, are we?”

“Sid!” Sue called out, relieved. “You’re back!”

7.

Quiniu Soptor

In the world's oceans,

July 31 to August 2, 2036

The black waves swallowed them up.

Quiniu adapted the interior and exterior systems to the changed continuum. A greenish flickering protective field appeared in front of their faces. The Positronic calculated the information from the optic sensors and presented it as a three-dimensional landscape before them. She freed the image of small and extremely small particles and made the display so bright that they could identify every single feature on the seabed without straining their eyes. If they had not been able to see a fish or a floating piece of trash every now and again, the journey through the ocean could just as well have been on a barren moon or a cold planet.

Brightly colored underwater landscapes full of animal and plant life that Quiniu knew from other planets did not exist here on Earth. The chalkwhite skeletons of coral reefs indicated that things had been different in the past.

Quiniu took a look at the environmental sensors. The seawater showed shockingly high concentrations of chemicals and fuel residues. Bleach, potassium cyanide, chlorine... Added to that were concentrations of feces and coliform bacteria, which were so high that she asked herself whether the humans somehow allowed their excrement to flow unfiltered into the sea from which they also fed themselves. Her respect for every single fish that survived in this poisonous swill increased enormously.

The Bohai Sea, which was part of the Yellow Sea, was among the shallowest seas on the planet. Quiniu held the recon craft just above the seabed so that she did not have to constantly maneuver to dodge the rumps of ships. For a while she managed to get around

anchor chains and buoy holders manually until she got fed up playing that game and switched to autopilot.

“Can you give me advice on which direction to go in?” she asked after a while.

“Eastwards,” was all her companion said.

She checked the map material.

“It would help me enormously if you could tell me roughly how far the area we are headed for is from here. I’m assuming it is not located directly in the Bohai Sea. If so, it would have been just as easy to bury the ship on land. By the She’Huan—the entire Yellow Sea is hardly deeper than an auxiliary craft!”

Quiniu Soptor activated a map across the display of their surroundings. It showed a section of the planet looking down from a height of two and a half thousand meters. Quiniu pointed with her index finger to the corresponding region.

“That’s the Yellow Sea. This is where Pyongyang is, which belonged in former times to an independent state, and is now Chinese. Below that is Korea with the capital city Seoul. This is where the largest part of the outdated computer, which the planet inhabitants refer to as a *pod*, is built. To leave the Yellow Sea, we first of all have to go eastwards and then turn to the south.”

She looked over at Rico. He was sitting there with a stony look on his face. Green shadows and reflections danced across his features.

“And?” she asked. “Do we stay here or go in the direction of…” she shifted the map to the left, “…the Pacific?”

Rico frowned. “I’m not sure, Quiniu,” he said apathetically. “The Pacific doesn’t seem to be the right destination.”

“But you are sure that going roughly in an easterly direction is right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what’s stopping us?”

Quiniu accelerated the recon craft. At an average depth of twelve meters, they passed the cities of Longkou, Yantai, and Weihai. Following that, they turned the craft in a southerly direction.

They soon reached the breakoff point, where the bleached carcasses of gorgonia splayed out like death fans given to the deceased. They stood there like silent guards that seemed to say “*From here on out, you’re on your own.*”

The seabed started sloping continually downwards until it had reached a depth of around seventy meters. The farther they went, the more trash and refuse the external cameras recorded.

They reached the East China Sea. Here, the seabed dropped down to 140 meters and then even more steeply to a depth of over 400 meters.

As Quiniu had fed local map material into the recon craft’s computer, she did not bother with converting the measurements into Arkonide units. She didn’t care whether they were facing a water column that was a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand meters high. It didn’t make a difference to the ship, which could withstand much tougher conditions than water and air pressure, even the extreme pressure that could occur at the deepest point in the Earth.

Despite this calming thought, she shivered. Quiniu felt a lot less confident than she admitted. She couldn't get a handle on Rico. He sat there rigid and immobile next to her in the cockpit. She had not doubted so far that he could help her in her search for a way to flee this solar system. She had assumed that his uncertainty and the gaps in his memory had been feigned. But she was no longer sure that was the case.

After they passed a fault line between two tectonic plates—the maps spoke of the Eurasian and Philippine plate—the ground dropped down more than seven kilometers into the deep. Quiniu turned the craft nose-down into the abyss. Rico did not look as if he was particularly impressed with their journey through the

underworld of the Terran ocean. He sat there rigidly as if somebody had internally inserted a stick into him.

They reached the bottom of the ocean valley, where mountains of trash were piling up. Decaying machines, vehicles, and even the steel girders from a building were lying around. Quiniu felt disgusted when she thought about how the Terrans, as she had become accustomed to calling them now, just threw so much away. Instead of re-using the valuable raw materials, they were simply dumping them in the ocean.

They steered the ship gently around the broken-apart wreck of a fishing boat. “East” was a pretty imprecise description. However, she would have been extremely surprised if Rico had suddenly presented a set of coordinates after speaking only vaguely of “the sea” a few hours before, which drew him towards and into it.

The colonial Arkonide woman compared the earthly maps with the positions she had been given. They were on course. She let herself sink into the soft upholstery of the pneumo-armchair. The figures showing the recon craft’s technical performance appeared on the left of the display. Speed, energy and oxygen consumption, payload...

“Was Thora given her name by the humans?” Rico suddenly asked.

Quiniu stiffened. She ran hot and cold at the same time. “How... What are you saying?” she asked.

“In Judaism, Thora is the word for faith,” Rico explained. “I’ve never heard of Thora as an Arkonide first name. That’s why I ask myself whether the humans named her so after she destroyed important landmarks.”

“Thora da Zoltral would...would...” Quiniu stuttered. She stared in disbelief at the dimly lit green Arkonide letters. “She would never allow herself to be *given* a name by such a primitive people!” she burst out.

Rico was far too heavy for an Arkonide of his size and stature.

And his oxygen consumption was exactly the same as that of one person—therefore, the same as hers.

“You are a robot, Rico.”

“Yes,” he said casually, as if she had pointed out that his hair was white or his irises red.

“Do you want to explain to me now who…or *what* exactly you are? What you are doing in…” She searched for the name Rico had told her before. “What you are doing in the Larsaf System, and how long you have been here?”

“No, I don’t want to.”

Quiniu sighed. She was afraid the robot would once again shroud himself in silence.

“On the one hand, my main computer unit recently suffered great damage. Parts of my mind are primarily controlled by the biological components at present. It seems to me that this information was not stored securely enough. I think this information is not secure enough for me to give it away.”

“And on the other hand?”

“I don’t know, Quiniu Soptor,” he said. “I can’t give you all of the information. That would go against my programming.”

She pressed her lips together. “Then at least I know where I am.” She thought things over. “Would you save my life if I was in danger?”

“In danger from what?”

“For example, because of a technical defect in the recon craft.”

“I would,” the robot replied.

“And if we were attacked by humans?”

“Yes!”

“If I was attacked by your master?”

“Then you could not count on my support.”

Quiniu smiled coldly. “And who is this master whose existence you just confirmed to me?”

Rico closed his mouth. He did not answer. Quiniu tried several times to get more information on the topic from him but to no avail. He did not move again until the abyss of the Mariana Trench opened before them like the enormous gullet of an archaic predator.

“We must go in an easterly direction,” he announced.

Quiniu breathed out, disappointed. She had hoped that the supposed spaceship would be located here in this part of the ocean. This was where the Philippine and Pacific tectonic plates came together, and it was here that the Earth reached its deepest point at more than eleven kilometers. With a little camouflage, it would be possible to conceal several spacespheres without deepsea probes or sonar devices detecting them.

“Are you sure the ship is not here?”

“You’re the one who spoke of a ship, Quiniu,” the robot answered, “not me.”

“So what you’re saying is that there is no Arkonide spaceship in the ocean?”

“No.”

She looked at him aghast for several seconds. Then she rubbed her face with both hands, suddenly feeling very, very tired. She had been awake for hours, perhaps even days. The information channels of the new city of Terrania had let her know about the activities in the desert. She had made masks, stolen a car with a combustion engine, and internalized how to drive it in order to pick up the man the humans were looking for—Rico—as discreetly as possible.

Everything had gone exactly as Quiniu had imagined, planned, and hoped. And now it turned out that the story had something

artificial about it, and he behaved as uncooperatively as a *man*.

On a sudden impulse, she pulled the joystick back, killed the engines, and watched with absolute calm as the display of the exterior suddenly angled upwards and the recon craft sank downwards into the deep with its heavy rear end now at the fore.

"What are you doing there?" Rico asked.

Quiniu did not answer.

"Should I take over steering?"

She looked at him. The sight of Rico's pale face immersed in streaks of green light scared her a little, but she managed to hold his gaze. "I thought we had an agreement," she said. "And now I find out that you have been lying to me."

"I've never lied to you."

Quiniu looked at the depth counter, which was climbing fast. "Then talk to me!"

Rico pointed towards the display showing their surroundings. "We have a shared goal. Out there! I'm being drawn strongly to a point in the ocean and I *know* that we will get some answers there and that we'll be given new options for how to proceed!"

"That's far too wishy-washy for me, Rico!" she exclaimed. "And anyway, you're contradicting your own words. You can't tell me that on the one hand you're guided by an indefinable *feeling* while on the other hand you seem to know exactly what we will find when we reach our destination!"

Rico lifted his hand but left it hanging in a strangely meaningless gesture in mid-air. For the first time since she had met him, the robot was apparently a little uncertain. Then he seemed to come to his senses. He placed both hands in his lap.

"You have to trust me, Quiniu Soptor," he whispered. "You don't have a choice; we need one another. Follow the directions I give you, and I'll bring you to a place from where you can leave this

planet."

Quiniu felt the blood drain from her face. The quilran feathers on her head secreted something fragrant. But she managed to quickly regain her composure. She grabbed the stick, restarted the engine, and maneuvered the recon craft back up out of the depths.

Maybe I should have tried my luck with the Fantan, she thought, annoyed with herself. *It might not be great to end up as Besun, but probably better than to be at the mercy of a stupid robot.*

The journey through the underwater landscape seemed never-ending. The minutes stretched out, turned into hours, and then into days. Although Rico was sitting right next to her, she felt lonely. How much more pleasant it would have been to be on this trip with her friend Tamika.

Tamika. She had hardly thought of her at all over the past few days. Tamika had crashed above the second planet with Thora. Until now, Quiniu had always assumed that her friend, with whom she had spent many enjoyable and passionate hours, had stayed close to Thora's side. *That she had survived.*

"You said I was the *third* woman Thora spoke of."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did, Rico. Or do you seriously want to tell me that you've already deleted the recording of that conversation?"

"No, I don't."

"Good." Quiniu folded her arms as if to protect herself from the information she was about to receive. "We still haven't spoken about the *second* woman. Tamika."

"That's true."

She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. The quilran feathers secreted something that had an unpleasant smell. "What happened to Tamika? She was not mentioned in any of the Earth reports. They only spoke of Crest and Thora. Did Tamika stay in the

background? Or did she not even come to Earth? Is she still on Venus? Did she die during the crash? Did you kill her with the weapons systems of your fort, Rico?"

She stopped. She had talked herself into a rage, although she had actually wanted to remain calm. When Rico didn't answer, she stretched out her right arm and slapped his shoulder.

"I don't know," he said numbly. "I can remember that she was injured. The machines were taking care of her..."

"And then?"

Rico swiveled his head from side to side in the same way she had seen humans do when they were answering a question with a no or when they wanted to emphasize something they were saying with a negative gesture.

"I have no access to any more information about Tamika."

Quiniu hit him again, harder this time, although she knew it made no difference to the robot. "You really are a technical wonder," she said. "Copied from men right down to the very last detail. They can also only remember things they want to!"

"I'm sorry, Quiniu."

"To hell with your sorry!" She stared straight ahead, her lips pressed tightly together.

Another hour passed. They would soon have crossed the entire Pacific without Rico having reached the destination he felt and hoped for, and him receiving any instructions to change direction. Quiniu was slowly losing all faith that there was a ship that would bring them out of this system—*the Larsaf System?*

To calm herself, she tried once again to get some information out of Rico about his past. She asked him about who had built him, his master—or *mistress?*—and about his type. She tried to provoke him by saying she did not believe he was Arkonide in origin. And in fact, she really had never seen a model—not even a concept—that was comparable to his.

But the robot did not fall for her tricks. Apparently, he had learned from the mistake he had made by inadvertently referring to the existence of a master. If he answered at all, it was evasively, or he used his trump card: the loss of part of his memory.

“And why is there a camouflaged Arkonide station on Venus anyway?” she asked. “Why was it built, and when?”

“That information is subject to confidentiality,” the robot said flatly.

“Would you give it to me if your master asked you to?”

Rico said nothing.

“Where is your lord and master?”

Silence.

“Did you spend your earlier existence on Venus or did you visit Earth at times?”

Rico sat there, silent and motionless. The only sound came from the hum of the discus-shaped drive and the quiet buzzing of the air conditioning equipment.

“Rico is not an Arkonide name,” Quiniu said churlishly. “It sounds far more Terran. Did the humans give you that name? Tell me, my dear friend, might I find traces of your existence in the Earthly databases?”

She did not expect an answer, and she did not get one. But now she was really curious. The idea had come to her spontaneously while she was talking, but what if she had inadvertently hit upon something?

The computer in her recon craft had an almost endless memory capacity. She had been mining all available data sources from Earth for days. Even at this depth of more than five thousand meters, the ship’s sensitive antennae was able to receive and analyze radio signals.

“Computer!” she ordered. “Search Earth’s data complexes for the name or designation ‘Rico!’ I want the search to go back five hundred years.” She glanced briefly at the robot. “Correction: extend the search to a thousand years back! Prioritize historical events that are linked to mention of a mysterious stranger!”

The computer confirmed her request.

“What do you hope to achieve with that?” Rico asked. “What could you possibly gain?”

Quiniu smiled. “Information,” she answered. “Knowledge.”

A few minutes later, she received the results. Suddenly nervous, she selected one of the entries and started to read it out loud.

“In the year 1545, a lama shepherd happened to discover silver embedded in rock in what is now Bolivia. This was so rich that it became one of the most important sources of income for the Spanish crown, helping them to achieve untold power in Europe. The name of the mountain where this supposed shepherd found the silver was Cerro Rico!”

She looked at the robot. “In Spanish, ‘rico’ means ‘rich.’ And ‘cerro’ means nothing more than ‘hill.’ The *Cerro Rico* was therefore given the right name if you ask me.”

But she was not going to be distracted from looking further. Perhaps she was mistaken, but she felt as if she was on to something that the robot would only too eagerly deny. She pointed to other entries in the list.

“Or even earlier. In the twelfth century, a village was established on a historically significant pathway around a former guard tower. It appears in the records as ‘Richesperc’ or ‘Rico’s Mountain.’ Today it is known as Riggisberg. According to legend, it was founded by a secretive stranger who purportedly established the village while preparing for and in support of his warrior master’s journey.”

She looked at him defiantly. “A thousand years in the past, Rico. Could it be that you were the unknown stranger? And who is this

warrior master they talk about?"

Rico smiled for the first time since she had met him. It looked wrong and...*artificial*. "It seems to me that the current situation is affecting your mind," he said. "Your attempts to find something are ridiculous. I could just as easily search through the annals of human history for the terms *Quiniu* or *Soptor* and would no doubt find something."

"Go ahead!" she challenged him. "I am sure that you will find no more than a dozen irrelevant hits."

She pointed a finger at the results of her own search. "Or look at this! In 1920, a boiled sweet named 'Ricola' was created. It was named after a famous baker. A company of the same name wasn't founded until later. And, Rico? Who invented it? Was it you, perhaps?"

"You haven't slept for a while," he responded. "You're fantasizing."

Quiniu leaned back. Her last suggestion was actually highly unlikely. She had only said it to see how he would react. Since she had started talking about his name and potential links to human history, the robot's reactions to her comments were fast and, it seemed to her, a little...emotional.

She checked their data. "Another twenty minutes and we will have arrived at the American double continent," she said. "That means our journey through the Pacific is over. Or should we continue through the Panama Canal and into the Atlantic? Do you want to?"

She noticed a barely discernible shudder pass through the robot. He lifted his head as if he could hear something in the distance.

"The Atlantic," he said in a drawl. "Yes. That's where he must be."

"And the spaceship?" Quiniu asked.

Rico did not answer.

8.

Tako Kakuta

Transport glider, Ferrol

The humans did not see much during the flight. They sat in a small cell somewhere in the bottom section of the spaceship. The air was hot and sticky, and it stank horribly of something decomposing.

Nobody had to mention that they had now left the planet Ferrol and its atmosphere. The lively crackling sound that had accompanied their flight during the initial minutes was gone, replaced by the thunder and roar of the drive modules.

Kakuta's stomach was churning. It felt as if he had a heavy stone where his belly and guts should have been. He urgently needed to relieve himself, but as long as there were no sanitary facilities he could retreat to, it was an absolute no-no for the Asian astronaut. Asking the others to turn the other way so that he could relieve himself in a corner would have been worse than having his hand chopped off.

Dignity and honor are sisters, he thought. *If one dies, the other one weeps.*

He did not know whether his suffering came from the unusual food and drinks he had consumed over the last few days or whether it was a physical reaction to the current situation. He put off thinking about it until he felt better, concentrating fully on preventing the others from realizing the state he was in.

Using all the willpower he could muster, he leaned on a wall, his arms folded, face rigid as a mask. Sloane gave him a dirty look again. She didn't have to say anything; the accusations were written all over her face.

We could have had the chance to disappear into the settlements and

go underground on Ferrol. Now we're in space. Where do you want us to jump to, you genius?

"They're probably bringing us to one of the two moons, Byton or Ferrolia," Daria Morozova said, interrupting the tense silence.

"How do you figure that?" Rod Nyssen, who was standing next to Sloane, asked her.

"We've been on the go for too long if they were taking us to another ship. Most of them are stationed in orbit around Ferrol."

"Vega has many inhabited worlds," Nyssen said. "Planets and moons. Who says we're not heading for one of them?"

Morozova shrugged. "Maybe you're right, Rod. But I think that, if that was so, they would have picked us up with a larger ship or at least transported us to one. What do you think, Tako?"

"I... I don't know," he answered.

Don't let anyone notice! he said to himself. *Be tough, little squid.*

Tako Kakuta closed his eyes. He thought about his parents, who had died far too young. They had named him Tako—Japanese for "squid"—because they loved the sea, and because the sea in the prefecture of Fukushima had very few healthy life forms in it anymore.

Squid were among the most intelligent sea creatures there were, surpassed only by dolphins. They were able to understand complex connections between things, could blend into almost any background thanks to the play of colors on their skin, and they were both soft and pliable but also tough and persevering at the same time. And they had a sharp beak they used to break open mussels and sea urchins.

All of these were indeed abilities they would have liked to give their child for life. There were no squid left in Fukushima. He had been the only one. And he was proud of the fact for as long as his parents were alive.

Then they died, and he had kept his first name secret all the time he'd lived on the streets. He soon became tired of the other kids explaining the true nature of squid to him.

"Tako!"

The teleporter winced.

"We're landing," Morozova announced.

Kakuta lifted his head. It was true—the roaring sound had changed, and now sounded more like heavy wooden beams scraping together.

A door opened. Nyssen and Morozova took the stretcher with Conrad Deringhouse on it. Kakuta would have liked to have helped them carry it, but he didn't feel physically able to do so.

"Let's go," Sloane said. "Let's see what fate the stubbornness of a man has delivered us to."

"Anne," Nyssen said gently. But she had already passed by him and disappeared out the door.

Nyssen turned to face Kakuta, lifting his shoulders in an almost apologetic gesture. Kakuta shook his head and nodded towards the door.

"We must stay together."

He followed the others out.

They were locked into an energy cage as soon as they left the spaceship. It glided slowly forward, forcing them to move with it.

Kakuta was suffering. His stomach cramped repeatedly and the pain spread through his entire body. He sensed that something in their surroundings had changed, but he couldn't put his finger on what. He only realized what it was when Morozova voiced it herself.

“The gravity here is lower than on Ferrol,” she said. “And if I’m not mistaken, it’s also lower than Earth’s. I feel as if I only have to push myself against something and I could fly.”

“At least there’s one advantage,” Nyssen commented.

They went through a sluice that took them to a storage and freight room. Containers and transport boxes of all sizes and shapes were standing against the walls, piled up on top of one another. Two of the four walls had been cut out of a rockface. The other walls and the floor shimmered in a color that was a mixture of dark blue and black. The floor felt a little springy when they walked on it. An energy shield stretched across the ceiling, and behind it they could see a brownish-green disk.

“That’s Ferrol,” Morozova said, ahead of the group.

“You were right,” Nyssen replied. “We’ve landed on one of the two moons. It must be the bigger of the two, Ferrolia. And from the provisional look of the walls and the floor, it seems to me the Topsidans created this station.”

“As a stationary supply and reinforcements base?” Sloane asked.

Nyssen nodded. “Looks like that to me.”

The energy cage slid slowly forward. Several Topsidans arrived, their weapons hanging over their shoulders. They pointed to the group, speaking so quietly to each another that the humans couldn’t hear them through the translators.

Once Topsidans had apparently seen enough, they went away again. The cage slid onward and stopped in front of a hatch, which proceeded to open with a hissing sound. A blast of hot, stinking air hit them.

“Damn!” Sloane cursed. “Look at this crap!”

An expansive hall spread out before them, measuring at least two kilometers across. Ferrons were standing or lying down all over the place, most of them wearing dirty, threadbare clothes. Fires were burning in barrels, and black smoke was rising from some of them.

In the exterior areas they could see strange shapes, ramshackle accommodations covered by torn items of clothing.

“What kind of godless hole have you brought us to, Kakuta?” Sloane asked.

Kakuta took a deep breath. The sooty air scratched his throat and, resisting the urge to cough, said, “Come on.”

He entered the hall, the others following. The hatch closed behind them.

“New arrivals!” a nearby voice called out.

A stalky Ferron came towards them, accompanied by six women. “Stop!” he called. “Stay where you are—not one step more!”

They stopped on the spot.

“To enter you must first pay tribute! What do you have with you? Any devices? Weapons? Clean food?”

Kakuta exchanged a quick glance with Morozova, before speaking. “We have nothing with us. We are prisoners, just like you.”

The translator interpreted his words. The Ferron came closer. Not only did he have the typically stocky stature one need on a planet with heavier gravity, he was also unusually tall. He looked at the humans disparagingly through deep-set eyes.

“You don’t even speak Ferrol. What world do you come from?”

“The outer planets,” Kakuta said, hoping the Ferron wouldn’t notice his brief hesitation.

“So, you think you’re too fancy to speak Ferrol?”

“Look, Hermot,” one of the women said, pointing to Morozova. “What fine clothing the ladies and gentlemen are wearing. They would suit me too!”

Anne Sloane stepped up beside her. Kakuta lifted his hand in hopes of preventing her from doing whatever it was she intended.

“We are prisoners, just like you,” the teleporter said. “We will keep our clothes. If you cause trouble, I will turn to the guards!”

Hermot looked at him for a second, irritated, then pulled back his head and laughed out loud. His companions joined him. “What did you say, whiteface?” he snorted. “So you want to hide behind the guards, do you? On you go, then!”

He stretched his arm out in a gesture that took in the entire hall. “Please, go and find a lizard whose shoulder you can cry on!”

Kakuta blinked. The smoky air was burning his eyes. “Are there no guards here?” he asked.

“Oh!” Hermot exclaimed. “I would never have expected so much intelligence in such a small skull! You guessed right, whitey! The damned lizards threw us in here and then left us to our own devices. They don’t give a damn what happens to us. But that also has its advantages...”

Three of his companions laughed, and it sounded like the bleating of goats.

“The law of the jungle rules this place—and when I see your thin arms and legs, I already know that you’re going to be low in the hierarchy!”

“We will respect your status,” Kakuta said, taking a little bow. “And now I request that you let us pass. We have a sick comrade, and we have to take care of him.”

The Ferron took a step closer. “I’m afraid it’s not that simple. You can’t come in unless you pay a tribute. Alternatively, we can offer you the chance to take part in a duel. If you win, you have my respect. If you lose, you’re going to be in pain.” Hermot laughed, again sounding uncannily like a goat.

“I will pay the price!” Nyssen’s voice rang out.

Kakuta turned towards him. “Rod...”

The astronaut nodded and placed the stretcher gently on the ground. Then he slipped out of his jacket, stepped up to the Ferron and handed it to him. “Are you interested in our jackets? Here, take this one. And now let us through!”

A derisive laugh came out of the dark-blue mouth of the Ferron. He tore the jacket out of Nyssen’s hand and threw it to the woman who had spoken before.

“Welcome to Ferrolia,” Hermot said. “I hope you have a wonderful stay here.”

An hour later, Kakuta had finally relieved himself in a horribly stinking lavatory and returned to the group. They had moved themselves as far as possible from the other prisoners and set up a small, temporary camp. Deringhouse was lying on the items of clothing they could get by without, and they were using the stretcher as a privacy screen.

“It’s anarchy here,” Morozova said. She was the only one to have looked around the prison camp. “Like that Hermot said, it’s dog-eat-dog. If two people can’t reach an agreement on something, they sort it out in a duel. I’ve already seen three in the short time we’ve been here. One of them ended fatally. And guess what they did with the body of the one who was killed!”

“What?” Sloane asked as Morozova paused for a second.

“The victor in the duel cut the victim up into pieces using a knife and threw them into a fire barrel. Then several Ferrons came and, one after the other, breathed in the smoke coming from the corpse.”

“Why did they do that?” Nyssen asked.

“I’m not sure,” Morozova asked. “If I understood the snippets I could hear from their comments, they wanted to assimilate the dead person in this way so that the memory of him would never fade or something to that effect.”

“These barbarians!” Sloane burst out.

Nyssen placed his hand on her arm. “I don’t find it that bad,” he said. “What do we do with our dead on Earth? If we don’t cremate them, we bury them in the ground and leave them to the worms and insects. If you ask me, breathing in the smoke from their burning bodies is a nicer gesture. It makes sense to me.”

“Why have I not been fed to the worms yet?” a weak voice said.

“Conrad!” Nyssen cried. “You’re awake!”

The group bent over Deringhouse, and he smiled weakly at them.

“What happened?” he asked. “Where are we…and what’s that stench?”

Kakuta felt a great sense of relief come over him. The former astronaut still seemed to be greatly affected by what he had been through, but the fact that he had regained consciousness was a good sign.

They told him everything that had happened since the *Good Hope* had crashed but stopped again when Deringhouse fell asleep.

As they sat down next to their comrade, Kakuta noticed that Sloane did not move from Nyssen’s side. What was going on between them? He assumed Sloane was attracted to Nyssen. But if her motive was to use him as backup in her attacks against Kakuta, that would make it more difficult to keep the group together in future. Why did she not understand that his powers were limited? That he didn’t have the talents of someone like Sid González, who was able to jump farther and regenerate much faster than he could?

Daria Morozova pointed up at the energy shield, which was stretched across the moon crater where the Topsidans had installed the freight store and prison camp. The middle of the shield acted like a lens, magnifying the terrible details of the destruction being carried out, visible from where they were standing.

“Ferrolia does not rotate,” she said. “Which means the planet is always up there. What is worse for the Ferrons? To die in this

terrible place or to have a first-row seat where they are forced to watch the downfall of their main world? Look at it: The mushroom clouds of explosions. Burning forests. Evaporating lakes."

The stretcher was suddenly pulled aside. Kakuta winced.

"You've already made yourself at home, I see!" Hermot said in a mocking tone. As always, his six companions were standing behind him. They literally had his back.

"How can we help you?" Kakuta asked.

"Very polite, whiteface," the stocky Ferron said mockingly. "I think that, first of all, you can give us this stretcher."

He held it up like a trophy he had just won, then he folded it together so that the two braces made of light metal were one on top of the other, then grabbed it with stretched-out arms and pulled it away. The metal bent with a creaking sound. Hermot's impressive muscles were visible beneath the arms of his shirt. When the stretcher had been bent into a V-shape, he threw it to one of his henchmen.

"Thank you very much; we could really do with that!" he said lightly, as if he hadn't just done something that required enormous strength. "And now, to get back to your clothing..."

Nyssen stood up. "It seems to me you already got enough from us," he said in a dangerously quiet tone. "Why don't you just leave us in peace and mind your own business?"

Hermot's face took on a smug expression. "Well, we certainly could do that, of course. But, first, you've got so many things that practically already belong to us, and secondly, you're ideal victims."

Morozova stood up. Kakuta and Sloane joined her.

"If that's the case, then I challenge you to a duel, Hermot," Nyssen said. "You against me. Man against man!"

The Ferron clapped his hands together. "A duel, just the two of us?" he said enthusiastically. "That's a fantastic idea."

Sloane touched Nyssen's arm. "Rod, be—"

Nyssen shook her hand away. "Do you accept the challenge?"

Hermot gave the slightest of bows. "I accept," he said happily.

His followers laughed. The woman who was wearing Nyssen's jacket punched her thighs with both fists, and the others followed suit.

Kakuta was overwhelmed by fear.

9.

Bernhard Frank

Terrania, August 1, 2036

He stood there before the white city, too stunned to speak. He had seen an array of photos of it from many different sources. Pods, cameras, even pictures from the bird's-eye view taken by military or journalistic robot drones.

Terrania looked exactly like its photos. And yet it was also different. The Stardust Tower stood out like a flagpole without a flag in the cloudless sky above the Gobi. A symbol. A lighthouse.

The missing flag could be found on the upper arm of the people they encountered. Not those waiting in trepidation to be let into Terrania, like him and Caroline, but the official, mostly Chinese people who were coordinating the entry procedure. The flags showed the white band of the Milky Way on a blue background.

"A utopia," Caroline, who was standing next to him, said.

"What do you mean?"

"Terrania. It's Rhodan's utopia."

Bernhard Frank shrugged his shoulders. "Did you know the ancient Greeks spoke of two types of utopia?"

"Did they?"

"Yes. They spoke of *eu-topos,* which meant the *good* place, but also of *u-topos,* which actually means 'the place that cannot exist'."

"Both of them seem to apply if you ask me."

Bernhard nodded. He soaked up the scene before him. Although he didn't intend to stay in Terrania, he was envious of the people who were already wearing the armbands of the Terran Union,

which made them a part of Rhodan's vision. His utopia.

For so many people, both the vision and the utopia were still very far away. Thousands were standing outside the city, waiting to get in.

Bernhard understood only too well that even a city that was growing unbelievably fast could only take in a limited number of new inhabitants. The tent city that was housing those waiting outside of Terrania was so expansive, not all of it could be seen. The states that had friendly relations with the Terran Union, like Switzerland and most of the Scandinavian countries, sent new supplies to Terrania—and to the city, or rather slum, outside its gates—every day. *Doctors without Borders* had set up aid centers where the people waiting could receive medical care, thus building a bridge between the vision and humanitarian problems.

Frank thought once again about the Greeks and wondered whether a similar situation had led to them speaking of both *Eutopos* and *Utopos*. As things looked at the moment, Terrania would become a good place for some people but would never become a reality for others.

If they survive the Fantan crisis, he thought worriedly.

The huge shape of the Fantan spaceship stretched upward from where it stood next to Terrania. It reached so high that its upper tip could not be seen from the ground. It shadowed the Stardust Tower. Fantan craft zoomed back and forth bringing the stolen goods that they referred to as "Besun" into the main ship, but it left the people gathered outside the city alone.

Bernhard knew from the news that the aliens had caused a wave of confusion, even panic in some places. But people had also become accustomed to the situation, even while hoping the strange occupiers would soon leave Earth.

"They'll let us in," Caroline said. She hadn't noticed the worried look on his face as he glanced at the Fantan ship.

Bernhard wiped the sweat from his face and made an effort to

smile optimistically. His daughter had wound a scarf that someone had given her as a present around her head and had tied a knot in it. Her face was slightly reddened. She insisted it was a suntan. Whatever the reason, despite the exertions of the past three weeks and the adventure they had been through together, she seemed to be healthier and more settled than ever.

Even as a teenager, Caroline had been a serious person who worried about people and society—a character trait that had become stronger while serving on the police force. It was not until now, after finding out about her special talent, that Bernhard could appreciate how much suffering and worry she must have gone through in her young life. And now here she was standing next to him, the improvised turban on her head, her eyes staring at the powerful Stardust Tower. She looked as if she were shining and radiating from within.

Bernhard reached out for her hand, and Caroline squeezed it in response. She glanced at him and saw the somber look on his face, then laughed.

“Oh, come on, don’t be such a Mr. Grumpy.”

“For you, I’m always Papa, not Mr. Grumpy,” he complained.

His friends and—with certain restrictions—his wife, Anjelica, were the only ones allowed to use that nickname. When his daughters used it, it sounded derogatory. It generally depended on the situation whether the name made him laugh or put him in a bad mood.

Caroline laid her right hand on her heart and lifted her left in the air. “I promise that from now on, I will never call you Mr. Grumpy again, Paps.”

He grinned. “You’re a good daughter.”

Bernhard was happy about their small dispute. Despite the bizarre situation they found themselves in, it made him feel that everything between them was as it always had been. He suppressed the unpleasant thought that they would soon be saying goodbye.

Caroline was determined to belong to the Terran Union, and she would fulfill her dream; that he was sure of. She had always known what she wanted, and she was stubborn enough to turn her intentions into reality. They had had many discussions where her intentions had clashed with his instructions. Her two younger sisters had been easier to handle in that sense. Maybe Caroline had already smoothed the way with their father for party girl Johanna and eternal sunshine Alexandra.

"Hey! You there!"

A man with black hair and a data-visor, which covered the top half of his face and looked as if it were glued to his temples, approached them. He wore his dirty uniform open all the way down to his suntanned chest. He laid a hand on his data-visor.

"I'm Julio," he said in English with a strong Spanish-sounding accent. "I'm to bring you to the tower."

Astonished, Bernhard looked at the endless rows of people waiting, standing in long lines before the info points, patiently doing what they had to. Waiting.

"What, us?" Bernhard asked distrustfully.

"Qué bueno," Caroline said. "Mi nombre es Caroline!"

"I'm Bernhard Frank," her father added in German. He had learned a few Spanish phrases for holidays, but he didn't like this Julio.

If everyone in the Terran Union is such a blowhard and wannabe-gigolo as sonny boy here, then hallelujah! he thought to himself.

"Encantado!" Julio said with a wide grin before adding in English, "Follow me!"

While Bernhard searched his memory for the Spanish word for *gigolo*, the man led them past those waiting and towards the white city. As they walked, he told them about the current state of affairs in Terrania. He used an expression that Frank didn't know, and Caroline laughed out loud.

Bernhard wiped the sweat from his brow and stomped behind them. Caroline noticed the disapproving look on his face. She slipped her arm into his, hooking them up at the elbows.

“You two seem to get on very well,” Bernhard said stiffly.

“Two minutes and you’re already jealous, Paps?” she asked, winking.

“What nonsense,” he said, contradicting her halfheartedly.

“Julio just explained that the city’s nickname at the moment is Spadesville, as most of the work is being done using simple spades from the inventory of the Chinese People’s Army because nobody can do the maintenance work on the Arkonide robots.”

“Well, he is quite the spreader of good news this…this Julio, isn’t he?”

Caroline grinned. “You should bury your spade again. Mr. Gr…ehm, Paps. Don’t worry, I’m not about to fall in love with a man wearing a visor.”

Julio stopped. He pushed the visor up onto his forehead. Bernhard could feel his stomach turn a little. Where Julio’s left eye should have been was a metal holder in the eye socket. It had something inserted into it that looked like an artificial iris and a pupil.

“There’s something I forgot to mention, by the way,” Julio explained in accented but perfectly understandable German. “My knowledge of foreign languages goes beyond Spanish and English. And to make up for that comment, Caroline, you are going to have to invite me out for a drink.”

“We’ll see about that,” the young woman answered with a mischievous grin.

“Bueno. I accept the challenge.”

Julio pulled his visor back down and continued walking. Caroline shrugged with a grin and walked on, pulling her father

along with her.

What have I gotten into? Bernhard asked himself.

Not twenty minutes later, they were standing on the ground floor of the Stardust Tower. It had no walls, and the upper stories rested on powerful columns. There were tables everywhere with people standing in line before them.

“The contact point for newcomers and coordination point for work assignments,” Julio explained. It sounded like he had said it a thousand times before.

“Do we have to stand in line again?” Frank asked.

“No,” Julio replied. “Mister Marshall wants to talk to you. You can take care of the bureaucracy later.”

He took them into a sparsely furnished office on the first floor.

“Wait here; Mister Marshall will be right with you,” he announced. “See you later.”

He gave Caroline a glowing smile, nodded to Bernhard, and left them alone.

“Not exactly the son-in-law I’m looking for...”

“Oh Paps, really!”

The door opened again, and two men entered. The taller of the two had short, dark blonde hair, and there was an air about him that made you feel you could trust him. Bernhard felt as if the man had been able to see right through him in a fraction of a second, but it wasn’t an unpleasant feeling. He guessed him to be in his early to mid-thirties.

The second man was about twice the other’s age, small and almost bald. At second glance, he seemed much younger to Bernhard. The skin on his face had a tautness and smoothness that was almost adolescent.

“My name is John Marshall,” the taller of the two said by way of an introduction. “And this is Mister Allan D. Mercant. Please forgive me for bursting in like this, but it’s about an urgent matter that we can’t put off any longer.”

“No problem,” Caroline said. “We were expecting to have to wait much longer to even get into Terrania, and now we’re already here. You certainly don’t have to apologize, Mister Marshall.”

The man looked at Caroline with his penetrating stare. “Perhaps I should,” he said thoughtfully. “I just read your mind.”

“You *what?”* she asked, flabbergasted.

Bernhard swallowed. “You’re telepathic?”

Marshall nodded. Then he pointed to four stools that were standing in front of the room’s large glass windows. “We should sit down and talk things over.”

It turned out that Marshall’s powers were not so strong that he could pick up the thoughts of *everyone* waiting. But Caroline had really stood out among the rest.

“Am I right in understanding that your talent is to find people or objects that have disappeared?”

Caroline nodded. “I’m not quite sure how it works. But it only works when someone feels a really strong need to recover something they’ve lost.”

“Are you saying,” the smaller man who Marshall had introduced as Allan Mercant said, interrupting the conversation, “that there is a connection between a lost object or somebody who has disappeared and the person searching? And that you can practically *sense* that connection*?”*

“Something along those lines.”

Mercant leaned back and looked over at Marshall.

“We should try it,” the telepath said.

“You’ve lost something and you want me to find it?” Caroline asked.

Mercant nodded. “We hope to get some useful tips on how to cope with the Fantan problem, or rather, how we can solve it.”

“What is it you’re looking for?”

“A robot.”

10.

Sid González

Aboard the Fantan ship

Sid dashed into a dark corner. He stopped there, leaned against the wall, and felt the cool metal on his cheek. Beads of sweat ran down his neck.

"Just a short break," he murmured. "I'll be right with you."

Both Reginald Bull and Eric Manoli had advised him not to look around the Fantan ship. But he insisted he knew better, just like the last time, when he jumped through the protective shield, which had mysteriously backfired.

He could still see the flames flickering around him in his mind's eye. Dr. Manoli explained to him that his collision with the protective shield's energy had had the same effect on his body as a strong electric shock.

Sid knew that it wasn't like that. It was the flames that had engulfed him, that nearly killed him. They had tried it for the first time in Dr. Goratschin's study, and it had almost worked.

Since then, the flames had been his nemesis. The goddess of retribution, who sought revenge for everything that he had done in the alleyways of the San Sebastian barrio...back in his earlier life when everyone had called him *Chico*.

"Just a short break," he murmured. "Then onward. I'll find a solution. All on my own."

Somewhere deep within, a derisive voice contradicted him. It blamed him for waiting too long to get out of the *Sregar-Nakut*, the Fantan ship. They had now left the Earth, and they were jumping through time and space just like in the science-fiction novels he had read as a kid...the fundamental difference being that, back then he had traveled in his imagination, allowing himself to be captivated

by the pictures in his head.

Today he really was a captive. And they were taking him away from everything he knew— with the exception of Bull, Manoli, Sue, and hundreds of objects the Fantan had brought onto their ship as "Besun."

What had Skelir said when Sid had regained consciousness? *You are Besun. For you no place is better than any other.*

That's how it was. As Besun—whatever that word might mean—they belonged to the Fantan. Besun on board a Fantan spaceship must not be questioned. As Besun, they were seen as a kind of loot that was collected in order to...

To what?

Sid balled his right hand into a fist. Why now—just as so much was beginning to change for him and he had been able to prove his worth as a human being—had he ended up in this unfortunate situation? He looked down at himself. Not only was the situation unfortunate, but he himself was miles away from being in his best shape. His left arm was held in place by a nutrient-rich spray plaster that Dr. Manoli had given him. The electrodes they had used to bring him back to the land of the living had left behind reddish-violet marks and blisters on his skin. The doctor had put a healing ointment on them.

Sid was ashamed that Sue had seen him lying there, his upper body naked, so helpless, waiting until the doctor was finished with him. She was only a year younger than Sid, even if people usually thought she was about twelve. She was the sister he had never had, and yet he felt shy in front of her when she looked at him.

He poked his head carefully out of the shadows of the corner where he was standing. Two Fantan passed by. They were using neither hoverbots nor transport platforms. Instead, they were walking on three or four of their extremities, not using them anymore for grasping, but for walking.

Sid jumped back fast. He pressed the translator disk against his

neck and tried to cover it as best he could with his free hand. As soon as they started talking, the disk would translate what the Fantan were saying—and no doubt draw their attention to his presence.

However, they didn't speak. Silently, they scurried along the corridor side by side, moving away from the corner where Sid was standing. His heart pounding in his chest, he started counting to forty-two in his head. He only reached twenty-eight before something hit him in the neck from behind.

He gasped and then collapsed. Unconsciousness came over him again. Colors and light disappeared, his field of vision narrowed, and he felt like he was sitting in a car with someone pouring a thick, dark fluid over the windscreen. Oblivion wrapped him up like a warm blanket.

Sid squeezed his lips together. The ship had passed through another transition. According to the Fantan Skelir, they would get more and more used to it over time. He held on tightly to that thought to keep himself from slipping back into unconsciousness again.

He couldn't faint. Not now! If the two Fantan heard him make a sound, he would have been discovered before he had been able to find something that might help him and the others out of their predicament.

Sid lifted his left arm and hit himself on the forehead with his plaster cast. *Don't faint! Don't faint,* he screamed inside his head.

He could feel the pain in his arm and on his forehead. Relieved, he realized that he had managed to successfully fend off the unconsciousness that had threatened to overcome him. He stepped back from the wall, and his field of vision expanded again.

Breathing in deeply, he thought about what he should do if the two Fantan turned up again. Teleport, perhaps?

That was not a good idea. The extraterrestrials would find out about his special powers, and that would mean losing a vital

advantage.

But they didn't come. Nobody came. Sid reached out carefully for the floor, then he turned around and sat up. When he was sure he had sufficiently gathered his strength, he pushed his head just far enough out of his hiding place to see into the corridor. It was completely empty.

As quietly as possible, he crept out of the corner. The hall was long and empty of people, but there were some very strange objects hanging here and there on the walls.

Sid lifted his head and sniffed cautiously. A heavy odor hung in the air, some herb or other that he was familiar with but did not like. There was also a smell of oil, and it wasn't a particularly fresh odor.

The smell of the Fantan.

He looked again up and down the corridor. Which side should he choose?

I need some luck, he thought. *Good luck, nothing more, nothing less. I need to find a way out. I'm going to find us a way out!* He repeated the sentence like a mantra, long enough to make him believe his own words. *I'm going to find us a way out!*

Sid closed his eyes. He needed a place where he could continue his search. If he stayed in the corridor, sooner or later he would run into a Fantan. What he needed was an escape route for their small group. And escape routes were not found in corridors.

He tried to imagine what the spindle ship looked like at the other end. Somewhere on the periphery. He concentrated, and it almost felt like he could visualize one of the rooms using his senses. His body cramped, and he felt the process drain some of his energy. He saw sparks of light through his closed eyelids. There was a short burst of pain, then he relaxed again.

Sid wavered but forced himself to open his eyes. He looked around from side to side as his arms searched to find a wall where

he could hold himself up. They found nothing.

He raised his hand to his face and rubbed the sweat from his eyes. Blinking, he turned around and tried to see through the dim light. If anyone had been there, he would have already discovered them or vice versa. The bright sparks that accompanied his teleporting would have given him away.

Nobody was there. Relieved, he let himself slide to the ground. With shaking fingers, he reached for his jacket pocket to get the energy bar that Dr. Manoli had given him. He tore open the wrapper, broke the bar in two, and stuck half of it into his mouth, placing the rest back in his pocket for later.

Sid felt that the way he used his power at the moment was too strenuous. In the future, he would have to leave more time between jumps. It was important not to overdo it.

Reginald Bull had said something to him before that he now couldn't get out of his head: "Growing up means having a realistic picture of yourself and about your options and capabilities. Courage is good. But recklessness can mean risking everything!"

Sid had answered with his usual *"Yeah, yeah"*, the way he always did when adults tried to lecture him. But Bull was right. The jump into the energy shield of the *Sregar-Nakut* had almost cost him his life. And worse, that would have sealed the fate of the others.

Sid knew that he only had a chance if they had access to his powers of teleportation. *He* was the one destined to rescue the four of them.

He could feel his heart beating faster and suddenly felt the entire weight of the responsibility resting on his shoulders. He took a deep breath. There was no point in making himself crazy. All he had to do was find a good balance between caution and his sense of adventure.

His eyes slowly became accustomed to the semi-darkness in the room. Three rows of strange armchairs, which were half-sunk into the floor, towered above him. They seemed to be set up on a kind of

stage on which there was only one single, very black wall.

Sid frowned. Had he landed in a cinema? He tilted his head back and tried to figure out roughly how high the ceiling was. He had developed a method for this, which he hated himself for. But he couldn't get it out of his mind; the association was just too strong. Whenever he asked himself how high something was, he automatically conjured up the image of Dr. Goratschin in his head. He had been exactly two meters tall. In his mind's eye, Sid stacked the Dr. Goratchins on top of one another until they reached the height of the object he was trying to guess.

"Five or six meters," he whispered, to fight down the rising sense of fear. *Concentrate!* He ordered himself.

He turned around. There were a number of shimmering metallic devices behind him, and some of them had small dots of light on them. It must be terminals of some kind, work stations.

Sid bit his lower lip. This room was not helping his search any. Stressed, he tried to figure out what to do next. He wished that Bull or Dr. Manoli were by his side to give him an idea.

That's when the next transition happened. Sid grimaced as the pain shot through his neck and the rest of his body. He pressed his teeth together and felt the dull pain in his broken arm as he balled his hands into fists.

He resisted. It felt as if a huge crowd of people were beating him with sticks all over his body, but this time any feelings that he might lose consciousness remained far away. Skelir had been right. Sid's body was slowly getting used to the transitions.

There was a noise. Sid winced. Somewhere, a door opened and a strip of light cut through the semi-darkness.

Sid ignored the pain in his body, dove to the ground, and crawled on all fours away from the strip of light, which was growing wider fast.

He saw the devices with the dots of light stretch up before him,

so he squeezed himself between two terminals as quickly as he could—just in time, before the light in the room became brighter.

He turned around slowly. With his heart beating wildly, he saw four Fantan enter the room. Three of them sat down in the front row of armchairs while the fourth started doing something on one of the terminals.

Sid reacted fast and pressed his right hand to the translator disk.

"Come on," he could hear coming out of the disk in a muffled tone, as one of the Fantan in the first row spoke, "it's almost ready!"

"Don't rush me, Roog!" the alien who was only two meters away from Sid said.

Strangely, Sid felt no fear anymore. It was true that his heart was pounding so hard it almost hurt, but he did not feel the slightest urge to flee. Instead, he was waiting with anticipation to see what would happen next.

The Fantan went over to his colleagues and dropped down into one of the armchairs as well. There was a noise—a dull tone that began to grow. Other tones followed. Some of them were regular and calming while others were strangely staccato and erratic.

Music! The music of the Fantan!

Sid felt the floor rising slowly. When it had come up to the level of the stage, the single black wall opened before them like a curtain. The music surged and the dull thud of bass beats made Sid's body vibrate.

Outer space appeared. Sid saw stars, an infinite number of them. It was an amazing sight to behold. They didn't twinkle in the night sky in the way he was used to. They were just there, still in the absolute blackness of space, forming wonderful patterns.

The floor slid across the stage and out into space. It continued on until Sid no longer saw the ceiling of the room above him, but a milky ribbon.

The Milky Way!

A shudder passed through him. Overwhelmed by what he saw, he pushed all thoughts of safety aside and stood up slowly. For a second, he felt dizzy. He reached out towards the terminals, using them to hold on. His mouth gaping open, he turned his head.

So many stars. The floor suddenly jarred to a halt. It had pushed Sid and the four Fantan in their armchairs about ten meters into space. Sid turned around and saw the dark wall of the *Sregar-Nakut*. An energy shield protected them from the vacuum of space. It must have used a different form of energy from the shields he had seen before. It didn't shine or flicker but was so completely transparent that it was as if nothing stood between them and the stars.

"Beautiful!" one of the Fantan said. "We're just about there!"

Sid was not afraid that the voice of the translator might give him away, as the music accompanying this fascinating backdrop was so loud and powerful that it drowned out everything else. All of a sudden, the pain returned, making the stars disappear. He waited, panting heavily, until it slowly faded. Then he intuitively opened his eyes again.

A spot of light appeared before him, getting bigger all the time. A planet. It was covered in red, yellow and brown streaks, not unlike Jupiter, which he'd had a poster of on the walls of his room for a few months.

Unlike Jupiter, this planet had a ring just like Saturn. *And two suns.*

Sid squeezed his eyes shut. It was true; two stars shone their light on the planet—a large red one and a much smaller yellow one.

"Look, a Zwiesel!" one of the Fantan called out. He pointed to a spot on the planet.

A second Fantan agreed, while one of the others said that the pattern reminded him more of a Krööh.

Sid pinched himself on the thigh. He must be dreaming! How

long had he been imagining what it might be like to fly to the stars? At the Pain Shelter, the orphanage run by the telepath John Marshall, he had soaked up every scrap of information he could about the wonders of space—always in the knowledge that he could dream about it, but that was all.

And now this.

Sometime after that, the next transition came. The pain was terrible once again but soon subsided. Then they saw a huge asteroid floating through space. The rays of a giant yellow sun shone on it, and chunks of ice and dust broke off to form a tail. The tone of the music changed, with new elements now that reminded Sid of a Glockenspiel.

"A traveler through space and time," one of the Fantan said reverently. "Is it not spectacular?"

Sid felt himself overcome by a sense of longing to join the aliens and share the experience with them. At the very last moment, he held himself back, realizing that wouldn't be a very clever thing to do.

Actually, it wasn't very clever for him to stand between the equipment instead of hiding behind it, but it was a risk he was willing to take. The scenery before him was too magnificent to miss.

"More!" one of the Fantan called out.

The next transition came. A brief burst of pain, and then Sid could see the broad ribbon of stars again. Had they transitioned out of the Milky Way and were now looking down at one of its arms?

The human body has more atoms than there are stars in the universe, his friend Elmer had once told him.

Sid asked himself whether that could be true. There were so many of them. And there were just as many galaxies even farther afield. When he lifted his head, he saw blurred images, faraway clouds.

Sid waited for the Fantan to say something again. But no sound

came. Instead, they sat silently wondering at the countless suns before them.

In that moment, he realized what it was that connected him to the Fantan. As strange as the cylindrical creatures might look, and as strangely as they may behave, they were still just like Sid in one essential way: the feeling of awe they felt at the universe and its beauty.

Sid realized that tears were rolling down his cheeks. He felt an unbelievable sense of calm within himself. If there had ever been a point in his life when he could die without caring about it, it would have been that moment.

Here and now, he thought. *Between the stars.*

The *Sregar-Nakut* passed through more transitions, bringing them to more new places with breathtaking views. At some point, Sid dropped down to the floor between the terminals again. These new impressions were becoming almost too much for him. The tears dried, leaving streaks on his face.

He suddenly remembered his companions, and the thought of them brought him back to reality. He sat up abruptly. He had almost forgotten his mission!

Sid concentrated and jumped. When he opened his eyes, he found himself on a curved surface. Brightness overcame him, and he slid slowly downward.

Shocked, he stretched out his arms and legs to stop himself from slipping. Something long and thin came in his direction. He stretched out his healthy arm and managed to grab something and hold onto it as tightly as he could. It felt like a flagpole except for the fact that it had struts and strange keys attached to it.

An antenna?

Sid looked around. He had landed in a large hall. The rounded floor belonged to a metal sphere, of which there were four more designs. Spheres standing on thin legs. Spheres with attachments

and recesses, all made of metal.

“Auxiliary craft!” Sid whispered, excited by his discovery.

They were similar in size to the *Good Hope*. His entire body trembled. He could see several Fantan and robot-like metal figures below.

Had they already discovered him?

He closed his eyes and thought intensely of the storeroom where he had left his companions, then jumped. He felt his surroundings change, stood up right away, and found himself looking into the familiar face of Reginald Bull.

Sid could see the relief in Bull’s water-blue eyes. Sighing, he let the man grab him in a bear hug.

“Sid!” Bull said. “Finally! We were getting worried!”

Sid smiled as Bull let him down to the ground again. “We’re saved!” he burst out. “I’ve discovered auxiliary craft. They’re just like the *Good Hope*. Giant spheres! They must be able to fly translight, which means we can return to Earth. We only have to...”

Confused, he stopped mid-sentence. He had expected Bull’s eyes to light up when he heard the news. Instead, the astronaut remained very serious. Far too serious!

Instead of the enthusiasm he had expected, Sid saw a deep sense of worry on Bull’s face.

“What... What’s wrong?” he stuttered.

“Sue,” Manoli, who had come up behind Bull, answered. “She’s dying.”

11.

Quiniu Soptor

In the world's oceans, August 2, 2036

With extreme care, Quiniu steered the recon craft through the 82-kilometer-long waterway, which was only a few dozen meters wide in most places.

Things became critical when they came to one of the twelve locks. However, they were lucky and only had to wait for a suitable ship to come by so that the recon craft could tuck itself in behind its keel and sneak through the lock in that way.

Quiniu was very tense every time she had to undertake such a maneuver—but she also felt the rush of excitement that came with this as a positive thing. Never in her life had she felt so *alive*.

Even Rico seemed to be enjoying the journey in his own way. He was constantly expressing the great respect he felt for the masterful structures built by the humans. Sometimes it even felt as if he was *proud* of them.

By passing through the three Gatùn locks, which followed one after the other, they overcame a difference in altitude of 16.5 meters in total. After that came the final two sections, the canal exit and the final Bahía Limón, where dozens of ships were waiting to be let into the Panama Canal.

"Welcome to the Atlantic," Quiniu said as she started descending into the depths again. "I hope your...instinct starts to bring results soon. I don't intend to circle the entire planet underwater."

"We're very close," Rico said. "I'm sure of it."

Quiniu did not answer. In her mind, she imagined what she would do with the robot if it turned out that his *feelings* had betrayed him.

They passed the Caribbean islands. Enjoying herself, she pointed

out the name of the island known as Puerto Rico. She knew there was no way Rico could have any connection to the island's name, but she took pleasure in drawing his attention to such facts just to test his reaction. Maybe she could prompt him to be less cautious and even find out something useful as a result.

Hours passed. While Quiniu started thinking whether she might be able to overcome the robot with a few targeted Dagor punches, the environmental sensors suddenly went off.

Quiniu winced. "It's showing a high concentration of steel!" she said in disbelief. "Arkon steel!"

They could see an elevated spot protruding from the seabed ahead of them. Although it was covered over with several layers of rubble and coral colonies, there was no doubt whatsoever concerning its dimensions or the rangefinder's results. The *hill* had a circular form, and it was almost four hundred meters high. The typical equatorial ring was buried in the ocean bed.

"An Arkonide battleship!" she called out in excitement. "I can even see superheavy thermoguns on the upper pole!"

Infused with renewed energy, she steered the recon craft closer to the spacesphere. "It's a wreck!" she burst out. "But there *must* be some auxiliary craft on it. Rescue boats that can bring us back to a world in the Empire!"

"Ignore it," Rico said. "The ship is unimportant. We must continue!"

Quiniu turned her head in slow motion towards her passenger. She looked at him, speechless.

"You're not serious, are you?" she asked, flabbergasted. "We are looking for a spaceship, then we find it after a long and pretty nerve-racking journey through the oceans of this planet...and now you say that I should just ignore it?"

"I told you that there was a ship, but I also said that wasn't our destination," Rico answered.

She stared at him for a few seconds. Then she closed her mouth again before saying: “That might be what you said. But not in that order.”

Rico gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. He didn’t seem to think that any further response or explanation was necessary.

Quiniu took a deep breath. “So, you want me to keep going? And just leave the wreck of the spacesphere behind us?”

“*Yes* on both accounts, Quiniu Soptor.”

“Thanks!” she said. “That’s all I wanted to hear. I thought for a minute that my error-prone hearing had sent the wrong signals to my brain. That’s one of the problems with biological systems like me—we make mistakes.”

The robot ignored her facetious remarks. Maybe his programming had a defect in it, making him unable to process sarcasm.

Quiniu pushed the joystick forward and the auxiliary craft accelerated. A few kilometers later, as they were approaching the Azores, the environmental sensors let out a shrill notification tone.

Quiniu almost jumped out of her chair. “What was that?”

A dome emerged in the endless darkness. Several navigation lights activated. The structure was gleaming.

Rico lifted his left hand, which was shaking a little. “You can bring the recon craft over there, Quiniu. There’s a lock.”

Soptor turned the front of the recon craft downward so that she could steer them towards where Rico had pointed. “Am I right in assuming that the honotable Mr. Robot has been here before?” she asked with an unmistakably acerbic undertone.

Rico looked at her through widened eyes. “It’s all suddenly coming back to me,” he said. “After seeing the underwater station with my own eyes! We’re just about to encounter...”

She squeezed her eyes shut. "*Who* are we about to encounter?"

"*Him.* I will introduce you to him. He will decide how to proceed with you."

She shivered. *How to proceed with you*—the words echoed in her mind.

What had she gotten herself into? The underwater station was made of Arkon steel, but that by no means meant that an Arkonide was waiting in there to greet them with open arms and fulfill her every wish.

She steered the craft to the place he had pointed to. A door slid silently sideways, and they could see a dimly lit airlock behind it.

Ignoring her concerned inner voice—what would she not have given at this moment to possess an activated extra sense that could tell her the right thing to do in this situation—she guided the craft into the open mouth of the beast and halted it.

The door closed behind them. Pumps were activated to expel the water from the airlock. This was supported by the air flowing in. The pressure increased constantly until it had reached exactly one bar, the ambient pressure on Earth at sea level.

The lighting plates on the ceiling of the airlock turned on with a loud click. Quiniu recognized the inner door of the airlock. It opened with a scraping and squeaking noise as its two halves moved apart.

She carefully pushed the joystick slightly forward. The craft glided at walking pace into a brightly lit hall. A hangar.

It was empty.

Rico sat up with a jolt. "We are here," he whispered unnecessarily.

Quiniu checked the ambient circumstances. The composition of the air and the gravity were perfectly adapted to Earthly conditions. Not like the Arkonide conditions at all.

“What are you waiting for?” Rico asked impatiently.

The uneasy feeling in her gut was spreading, and there was no sign that it would subside any time soon. She found the station creepy. Threatening, even.

She reached to the top of the Arkonide battledress she had been wearing for two days and closed the magnetic clasp. Then, with Rico, she left the safe interior of the recon craft.

The hangar was oval in shape and the ceiling was just under ten meters high. Apart from three submarines, the chamber was empty. The alloy on the metal walls shimmered darkly.

Strange.

“Greetings, Rico,” a deep voice rang out. It spoke Arkonide but with an unfamiliar accent.

A colonial dialect?

“The dome’s Positronic,” Rico explained. He pointed towards a door. “We have to go over there.”

“Rico,” the voice boomed. “I have to inform you that your companion is not authorized. Remove her or I must eliminate her!”

Quiniu stopped on the spot as if she had hit a rebound shield. Why on earth had she agreed to come here? Rico would send her away, maybe even have her killed. Why had she not thought more clearly about the fact that he was a robot? She had helped him reach his destination, and that made her now superfluous.

She looked back at the small craft. She should have brought a weapon. It was probably too late for that now.

Rico lifted his right hand. “Wait!” he ordered. “My companion calls herself Quiniu Soptor. Where do you get the idea that she is not authorized?”

“She is not authorized,” the voice announced laconically. “You should know that.”

“I know what I know. And what I’m doing,” Rico answered.

She looked at him sideways, astounded. The robot had once again surprised her. This time positively so.

“Explain to me why she is not authorized.”

“She is not on the list of authorized persons, Rico,” the dome’s Positronic answered.

“Then add her name!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is a violation of the First Command. The First Command prohibits the admission of humans and individuals categorized as enemies of the Empire.”

“Quiniu belongs to the Arkonide Empire,” Rico said. “There is no doubt whatsoever about the fact that she is not an enemy.”

“That is what you maintain,” the voice said in a friendly tone. “My sensors are picking up a high degree of hostility. I cannot categorize her as an Arkonide.”

“Because she is not a purebred Arkonide, you automatically categorize her as an enemy or as a *persona non grata*?”

“That is correct.”

“Positronic,” Rico said with the tiniest trace of hesitation, “do you categorize me as authorized to issue Grade One orders?”

“Yes, Rico. You have that authorization.”

“Then I order that this characteristic is obsolete as of now. Arkonides who are not of pure race are not a threat. They are authorized to enter the station. Understood?”

“Order understood and accepted,” the voice said in the same

friendly tone as before. “Arkonides who are not purebred are not a threat. They are authorized to enter the station.”

“Good,” he said. Then he hurried off.

The door that Rico had pointed at before his discussion with the Positronic opened before them. Quiniu followed him as fast as her legs could carry her. She noticed the effects of the two days she had been sitting in the cockpit, only able to stand up briefly to relieve herself and freshen up in the tiny hygiene chamber. Her stiff joints pained her.

They passed through a corridor that branched off twice and came to a room that had several rows of loungers. Everything was clinically sterile. A sort of hospital?

“What kind of place is this?” she asked.

To her surprise, the robot actually answered. “It’s a deep-sleep facility.”

Was she mistaken or was there a touch of unease, perhaps even worry, in his voice?

The robot went through all of the rows. Then he asked the Positronic, “Where is he?”

“He has left the dome,” the friendly voice answered in the same dialect.

“That’s impossible!” Rico cried. “There are no remedies in the dome!”

“That is correct.”

“So how can he have left?”

“I don’t know. But I can inform you of his last known location. Do you want to find him?”

Rico said he did.

Too hastily. Too nervously.

"Follow the directions, Rico!"

An illuminated blue line appeared on the floor, leading out into the corridor and ultimately into the large storeroom. It was vacant, empty except for a device unlike anything Quiniu had ever seen, clearly technical in nature. It was about twice her height, and it looked like it had been designed to imitate a strange gateway—actually, more like an archway. There was some kind of terminal on the right-hand side, but again it was unlike any terminal she had ever set eyes on.

Before she could ask Rico what this was all about, he surprisingly beat her to it.

"What kind of device is that?" he asked loudly.

"I don't know," the ever-present voice of the dome Positronic said.

"How did it get here?"

"I don't know."

"How can that be? You—"

"Your friends have arrived," the Positronic interrupted. "Should I bring you to them?"

Rico was visibly shaken. "What friends? I—"

"Non-purebred Arkonides."

"Did you let humans in? Why?"

"I followed your instructions, Rico," the Positronic announced politely. "Larsaf-Three belongs to the Arkonide Empire. The humans are categorized both historically and biologically as colonial Arkonides or non-purebred Arkonides. They do not constitute a threat. That is correct, is it not?"

12.

Tako Kakuta

Prison Camp, Ferrolia

"Rod," Kakuta said hastily, "I don't think that's a very good idea."

"I won't let you do this," Sloane added. "Tako will immediately __"

"May I say something?" Nyssen cut her off. Turning to Hermot, he said, "Could you excuse us for a second? Don't worry, I won't run away."

He pulled Anne Sloane to the side with him, and they stopped about twenty steps away. The dark-haired woman was the first to try to persuade the former astronaut not to continue. Kakuta couldn't hear them, but her body language was enough to reveal that she was extremely upset. She pointed towards Kakuta several times and then spread her arms out.

"What's wrong with her?" a Ferron woman, who was wearing Nyssen's jacket, asked. "She's a woman. She can pick out as many men as she wants. Why does she stick with him?"

Nobody answered her.

Nyssen remained standing upright and let Sloane do the talking. When she hit him on the chest with her fists two or three times, he grabbed her hands and pulled her to him. Then he kissed her.

"Well, who would have thought!" Hermot said derisively.

Kakuta lowered his eyes in shame. He found the scene unpleasant. Sloane obviously had strong feelings for Nyssen, and now she feared for his life.

"Are you ready yet?" Hermot yelled. "I haven't got all day. After all, we've got another passover by fire to prepare!"

Kakuta looked up again. Now Nyssen was speaking. Sloane looked a thim, nodding several times. Then he took her hand and returned to the others.

“I’m ready,” he said. “But before we begin, I want to be sure that we understand one another perfectly. If I win, you will only come to us to ask if you can get us something to eat or drink. And you protect us from all harassment, no matter what kind, by the other prisoners. Is that clear?”

“Crystal clear,” Hermot said. “And if I win... Well, you’ll see.”

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head. Kakuta swallowed the lump in his throat that formed when he saw the huge muscles of the Ferron man. And if he was from Ferrol, his body was used to a gravity that was forty percent heavier than Nyssen was used to.

Hermot turned around. The other Ferrons stood on either side of him, forming a walkway for their leader. He strutted past them like a cockerel, stopping about fifty meters away.

“Look!” he yelled. “This colonist has challenged me to a duel.” He pointed towards Rod Nyssen, his arms stretched out.

Nyssen pulled his shirt over his head and threw it to the floor. Then he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one.

“Look at this stalk of Mancha!” Hermot shouted out at the top of his voice. “He’ll break the minute I touch him with two fingers!”

A few of the Ferrons laughed. More and more of them came to watch, forming a large circle around the two challengers.

Kakuta looked in horror at his comrade. Nyssen casually smoked his cigarette. His body seemed to be anything but well-trained or athletic. He looked skinny, almost a little emaciated. Kakuta knew that looks could be deceiving, but when he compared Nyssen to the brawny-looking Ferron, it was clear that the human had nothing, absolutely nothing, to counter the Ferron with.

“Rod!” he whispered insistently. “This is not the time for heroic

acts. I'll teleport into the freight room and take a weapon off one of the Topsidians!"

"We can't let them find out about your teleportation skills because of a small matter like this," Nyssen whispered back. With a grin he added: "That big blue smurf is about to get the shock of his life."

He clapped Kakuta encouragingly on the shoulder, flicked the cigarette away, and walked slowly through the two rows of Hermot's followers, coming closer to his opponent.

Rigid with fear, Kakuta followed Nyssen with his gaze. The man appeared to be extremely confident of himself.

Other Ferrons joined the onlookers who had already gathered and began to shout and jeer loudly. Hermot's followers also joined the onlookers to get the best possible view of the duel.

Kakuta looked up and stared at the streaked brownish-green disk that was Ferrol. Up there, lizard-like beings from another solar system were slaughtering Ferrons inside and outside of the atmosphere. And here, in this moon crater, where they were locked in by an energy shield, they were going to harm one another in a duel out of sheer desperation, a hunger for power and boredom.

Up there, Topsidans are destroying the lives of Ferrons, and down here the Ferrons are doing it themselves, he thought bitterly.

He directed his attention back to the makeshift arena. A number of Ferrons were running around with colorful snippets of foil, handing them out and receiving others in return.

"They're even placing bets," Morozova said. "Duels are like a sacred form of entertainment to them."

Kakuta touched his belly, which was bothering him again. He concentrated on the two contenders, who were dancing around one another, their arms stretched out to the sides. Kakuta got ready to jump into Hermot, in case Nyssen got into difficulty and things were looking bad.

The Ferron is taller than Rod, he thought, *and almost twice as wide. This is not going to go well.*

Some of the onlookers began to hammer their upper thighs with their fists, just as Hermot's followers had done before. Other Ferrons followed suit. A few seconds later, every single one of the two hundred or so onlookers were doing it. The hall was filled with the sounds of drumming and thumping.

Somebody hit a gong, and the audience roared. At that very moment, Hermot took two fast steps towards Nyssen and thrust out his fist. Nyssen ducked to avoid it before rushing towards his opponent and ramming himself into his flank.

The brawny Ferron didn't budge an inch. Instead, he turned around extremely fast and tried to land a punch again. Nyssen moved backwards, as light-footed as a dancer. Once or twice the blue-skinned fist rushed past his chin, just missing it by centimeters.

When his opponent punched again, Nyssen crouched down and landed a series of very rapid punches with a left-right-left combination on Hermot's belly and liver. All it did was knock the Ferron off-balance for a second, but it was enough to give Nyssen time to jump out of harm's way, dodging Hermot's fists.

The Ferron let out a furious scream. He lowered his head like a wild bull, his impressive neck muscles bulging out.

"He's getting to him," Morozova said. "That might be good, but it could also be a disaster. If the Ferron manages to get in one good punch..." She didn't finish her thought.

Hermot stomped towards his opponent while Nyssen dodged backwards. The crowd went wild. They seemed to be enjoying the fight enormously.

Nyssen did a body swerve, and Hermot took a punch immediately. Nyssen turned in the opposite direction from where the punch was coming from and kicked the Ferron with all his strength in the side.

Hermot bellowed in anger. However, the kick didn't seem to affect him at all. He stomped once again towards Nyssen while the latter continued to dance around, as light-footed as a ballerina, beyond the range of his opponent's punches.

"Rod has an advantage thanks to his speed," Kakuta said to Morozova without taking his eyes off the two fighters. "But how long can he keep it up?"

"Good question. I don't know."

"Stop running away!" the Ferron called out loudly. "I only want to play!"

Again his fist missed Nyssen's face by centimeters. Nyssen ducked below the next punch, turned away from him, and kicked his opponent in the right knee. The audience screamed enthusiastically. Hermot stopped for a second, shook his leg, and then went for Nyssen again.

"He's not having any effect," Kakuta said, more to himself than anyone else. The tension was killing him.

When the Ferron swung again, Nyssen chose a combination of twisting his body and kicking the Ferron in the side. But Hermot had been paying attention, and he shot out his arm like an arrow and grabbed Nyssen's leg.

Sloane let out a high-pitched scream as the Ferron lifted Nyssen's leg up high. The former astronaut lost his balance and hit his head on the ground as he landed.

Hermot yelled in triumph and kicked Nyssen in the side. Nyssen flew through the air and hit the ground again. Hermot was immediately at his side, where he prepared to deliver the next kick.

Kakuta took a deep breath. The moment now came for him to interfere. He concentrated...and watched as Nyssen dodged the Ferron man's kick by maneuvering himself in a seemingly impossible manner before grabbing Hermot's leg and toppling him.

Hermot crashed to the floor with a cry of shock. Nyssen rolled

over. He was visibly shaken, but he managed to come to his feet in front of the Ferron.

Hermot let out a shocked cry as Nyssen grabbed him by the hair and upper left arm and wrenched him upwards. As if the muscular Ferron suddenly weighed a great deal less, Nyssen hurled him through the air.

“You’re going to pay for that!” his opponent screamed as he stood up and rushed at Nyssen like a wild bull.

The latter let himself fall to the ground at the very last moment and knocked Hermot off his feet. The blue-skinned man fell headfirst to the floor, and before he had even realized what had happened, Nyssen was on top of him. He heaved Hermot up high, held him for a second above his head like a weight-lifter with a barbell, and then smashed him to the floor.

Hermot lay curled up on the ground. The audience fell silent, as if they were in a pod video and someone had turned off the volume.

In slow motion, Kakuta turned his head to Anne Sloane, who was standing next to him with a grim look of concentration on her face.

“It’s you,” he whispered. “You’re helping Rod telekinetically!”

“What do you think?” she answered. “Do you think I would let my friend down the way you’ve done?”

Kakuta did not reply. He looked at Nyssen. The audience had overcome their silence and was now cheering for the unexpected winner of the fight.

Nyssen placed his left foot on the chest of his opponent. “Admit your defeat and I will let you live!” he shouted.

Hermot squirmed on the ground, wheezing. “I... I...” was all he managed to say.

“Nice and loud, so that everyone can hear you!”

At that moment, the Ferron pulled his left leg to an angle and

drew something that glinted from his boot. Kakuta heard a shocked choking sound from Sloane's direction.

Hermot stuck the flashing implement into Nyssen's leg. The former astronaut let out a scream, stepped back and kicked the weapon out of the Ferron's hand. Then he let his foot smash down onto Hermot's chest. Kakuta could hear Hermot's ribs crack. The Ferron man's arms dropped weakly to the side.

Kakuta, Sloane, and Morozova ran to their companion. Nyssen had moved two steps away from Hermot and was waiting to see whether the strong Ferron had finally had enough. Blood was dripping out of the wound in his left leg.

"Rod!" Sloane called out. "You're injured!"

"Just a scratch!" Nyssen gasped. "Not worth mentioning."

He let Anne hug him briefly, then he called out, "Everyone saw me conquer Hermot. I now demand that..." He stopped. An expression of astonished disbelief appeared on his face. "That we..."

Nyssen blinked, as if something had flown into his eye. All of a sudden, foam was coming out of his mouth. He swayed.

"Rod!" Sloane cried out, afraid. "What's wrong?"

Nyssen stretched his arms out to her. Before he could hang on to her for support, he collapsed to the floor.

"Rod!"

Still gasping, Hermot rolled around. Dark-blue blood trickled out of several wounds. "I... I..." was all that came out, followed by a gurgling sound.

Sloane lay Nyssen's head in her lap and desperately stroked his face. "Rod," she wept. "What... What can I do?"

The former astronaut managed a tortured grin. He looked past her, and a ray of light fell onto his face.

“I always wanted to…fly to the stars,” he whispered, falteringly. “Never… Never did I think I would die…in the light of Vega.”

His eyelids fluttered.

And then he was gone.

13.

Bernhard Frank

Portugal, August 2, 2036

In the past years, he had been shown a great number of technical innovations. Gadgets, apps, biochips and the like. Sometimes he brought them home for his own use, and he was even allowed to keep many of them permanently. Some of them were just frivolous things that nobody really needed, where astronomical marketing budgets were required to generate potential buyers.

One unforgettable moment was when he had demonstrated the 3D technology of the new Facebook pod to the very surprised presenter of a breakfast television show while on air. After that, Zuckerberg had made a huge fuss in the press, complaining about the *spoiler* put out there by his "former friend." The supposed dispute between them dominated the media until—right on time for the launch of the new hard- and software—the two of them hugged in front of the cameras, thus officially making peace.

It was the most successful launch of a piece of entertainment technology in history. In short, since the fateful events of 2020, Bernhard had gotten used to technical miracles that people didn't anticipate because they weren't even aware that research was being taken in that direction. However, since he had immersed himself in the wonderous world of the Chinese-American-Arkonide hybrid technology, he knew that a new era had definitely dawned.

They were standing on the beach in a deserted bay in Portugal. A wind, which was rather cool for the time of year, blew over the surrounding cliffs. Seagulls shrieked. Bernhard didn't know whether they were angry about their beautiful landscape being disturbed in this way or whether they were hoping to get their next meal from the discarded leftovers of the visitors who had just landed on the beach.

Four supercopters had let down fifteen people and five hybrid

submarines, then had disappeared again, their rotors buzzing loudly as they left. The boats looked like long silver fish with an almost circular body in the middle. The noses of the boats tapered to a point, and what would have been the lower jaw if it were a fish protruded farther out at the front than the lower jaw, giving the boats a menacing air. They were labeled B1 to B5 in bright yellow letters.

Allan Mercant was in charge of Operation Elliot/Ikarus/Ulysses. Besides Bernhard and Caroline, there were twelve men and women from the former Chinese People's Liberation Army. One of them—who had been introduced to Frank as He Jian-Dong—appeared to occupy a higher function than the other soldiers. If you could even use the term "soldiers" for Rhodan's followers.

Bernhard had wanted to ask Mercant about that as he opened one of the hybrid submarines—which was done by folding open the entire top half—but he asked everyone to form a semi-circle. Following that, he instructed them briefly on how the submarines worked. A Chinese woman translated his words in Mandarin, as not all of her companions could speak English.

"We call them *Barracudas*," he explained. "Each has four torpedo and harpoon tubes with which they can actually *bite*. The barracuda, which can swim at about twenty-five knots or forty-five kilometers per hour, is not one of the fastest underwater creatures. The blue shark manages speeds of up to thirty-eight knots and the black marlin an impressive sixty knots."

Mercant stroked the silvery-black shimmering shell of the submarine. "Our barracudas can manage an unprecedented eighty knots. That's just under a hundred and fifty kilometers per hour and forty-one meters per second! Let those numbers sink in! The French with their atomic submarines, which are coincidentally also named *Barracuda*, are lagging way behind with their twenty-five knots."

He took in the submarine with a sweeping hand gesture. "The boats measure three by three by twenty-one meters. The drive works based on the *trinity principle*, which was invented by the Americans. It is made up of three components. First, conventional jet propulsion that is powered by twelve fuel cells. Water is sucked

in, accelerated, and expelled again. Then there are the kinetic wheels, which continuously charge while the submarine is in motion and can either use their stored energy immediately or be set to silent mode, during which all systems are shut down to zero, and all motion comes solely from the stored kinetic energy."

Mercant bent down into the cockpit. While he was pressing a few levers and buttons, he told them, "The third component is the most important of all. It accelerates the barracuda to the astounding eighty knots I mentioned. That is faster than any human has ever moved underwater—at least on this planet."

Bernhard, Caroline and three of the Chinese people laughed. Once the woman had translated everything, nobody laughed. Bernhard asked whether she had perhaps translated it wrongly or whether a statement like that simply wasn't funny in Mandarin.

Mercant activated a lever and the barracuda moved. Caroline automatically took a step forward. Fascinated, her father also stepped towards the boat, which he had believed only a few seconds ago to be made of hard, rigid steel. Ripples passed through the barracuda's body like waves, starting from the grim, forward-facing head, and ending with a heavy swipe of the finlike stern.

"Wow!" he exclaimed.

Mercant returned the lever to its initial position and stood up again. His cheeks were glowing. "Do you like what you see, Mister Frank?" he asked. "The mechanical motor is the pièce de resistance of our little fleet!"

Bernhard nodded. "They way it moves is amazing. When it is deactivated, it looks pretty rigid."

Mercant nodded. "The Chinese Army did research work on the outer skin for decades, and the basic construction is based on their findings. But it was only when we started using elastic Arkonide metalplast that the problem of balance between robustness and elasticity was solved. The software for the perfect wave movement comes from the Korean software foundries, by the way. But then, what else would you expect?"

“How can you sit inside when the entire body is moving?” Frank asked.

“The crew—a minimum of one and a maximum of five—sit behind one another. The bucket seats are fixed onto sliding rails that make sure those seated hardly notice the movement. For longer deployments, hammocks can be attached along the sides, and up to three people can sleep in them at the same time.”

He started to explain how to handle the drives in more detail. Bernhard could feel Caroline’s cool fingers in his right hand. He looked at his daughter and was glad that she had persuaded Mercant to bring him along.

The young woman went up onto her tip-toes and whispered in his ear, “There’s something fishy about this guy, He Jian-Dong. He’s has lost something as well, but I can’t feel what it is or where it is.”

Bernhard hugged his daughter with his right arm and kissed her lightly on the temple. “Mercant chose those who are taking part in this,” he whispered back, just as quietly. “You don’t need to be afraid of him.”

“But he didn’t choose him,” Caroline whispered. “I just found out how this former General—”

“Baj Jun?”

“Yes. How Baj Jun practically ordered Mercant to bring this guy along. Haven’t you noticed the two of them hardly speak?”

“Maybe,” Bernhard said very quietly. “But I think we should be listening to Mercant’s explanations.”

The former technology editor took in every word Mercant uttered, every movement of his hands. In between that, he looked over at He Jian-Dong every now and again. Caroline was right. There was something spooky about the man.

Half an hour later, barracudas-1 to -5 slid out into the waves of the Atlantic. In a synchronized maneuver, they first dove down and

then switched to the mechanical drive.

There were three people in every hybrid submarine. That left some space for cargo in each of them, if required. Bernhard was relieved that he was able to embark on this adventure with his daughter and Allan Mercant. He would not necessarily have wanted to descend into the deep with the Chinese participants alone. Not that he had anything against them—quite the opposite. They had freed themselves from the fetters of their former state and joined Rhodan. But it was just more pleasant to have his occasional questions answered by Mercant and to have Caroline at his side as moral and emotional support.

Their submarine—the Barracuda-1—glided through the water at the head of a V-formation. Caroline was as precise as possible concerning the direction they should move in.

Frank was extremely proud of his eldest daughter. On the way to the Gobi, he had asked himself again and again why on earth she wanted to use her special powers to support Rhodan. And then, not even twenty-four hours after their arrival, they had been brought into his innermost circle of trusted advisers.

Although Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, a man named Homer G. Adams, and a number of other important people in the young Terran Union had disappeared at the moment, the motors that drove Terrania forwards still ran unabated. Everyone seemed absolutely convinced that the kidnapped or disappeared individuals would all return soon. Until then, problems like the Fantan invasion, the logistics of supplying Terrania with food, or the missing Arkonide robot were to be solved by others.

“Nobody wants to explain to Rhodan that we had the reins in our hand but lost control of them only because he didn’t return from his excursion on time,” Mercant explained when Bernhard asked him about it.

“What’s with that guy, He?” Caroline asked. “He didn’t seem to be very happy about being taken on this mission.”

“Was it that obvious?” the small man, on whose bald head the

LEDs of the steering system and the GALILEO map were reflected, asked. “I don’t generally speak badly of people who work for me behind their backs. However, everyone who knows He would say the same about him. He Jian-Dong is General Baj Jun’s former adjutant, and the general is one of the most important people in Terrania. And if Baj Jun says that He has undergone a process of inner transformation just like he himself did, then I believe him. Even if things looked very different only a few days ago. I’ll spare you the details.” Mercant rubbed his head with his hand. “We desperately need good people, and there is no doubt whatsoever about the fact that He is an excellent soldier.”

The proceeded onward through the darkness of the ocean for a while. Then Mercant suddenly turned around.

“You come from Bavaria,” he said. “Does the tradition with Lederhosen and tankards of beer still exist?”

“Unfortunately,” Bernhard replied. “I mean, I’ve got nothing against beer. But the Lederhosen make me shudder. I was constantly made to wear them as a child. I’ve avoided them like the plague ever since.”

“Somebody once told me that Lederhosen were practically indestructible.”

Frank laughed. “People do say that. Maybe that’s why it’s so difficult to get rid of them.”

Mercant laughed, then directed his attention the control panel again. Bernhard was happy about this small diversion, which was followed by several minutes of silence.

Then Caroline asked, “What should we expect there, where this Rico can be found?”

Mercant shook his head thoughtfully. “I don’t know, Miss Frank. I haven’t got the slightest clue. But as you saw, our men and women are armed. If necessary, we might have to use violent means.”

Bernhard leaned back. Caroline’s hand sought out his hand, and

he took it.

Things are turning serious, he thought.

14.

Reginald Bull

The Fantan Ship

He was sorry that he had been unable to react properly to Sid when the boy had proudly announced his news. But Sue's condition had gone downhill in the last half hour to such an extent that he was expecting the worst.

"What's wrong with her?" Sid asked, taking her hand in his as he knelt down beside her. He looked up with a shocked expression. "Her hand is ice-cold!"

"It's the transitions," Manoli explained. "While Reginald and I have fewer and fewer problems with them every time, they seem to cost Sue a great deal of energy. I assume you've already gotten used to the transition shocks?"

"Then give her medication, Doc!" Sid said without answering Manoli's question, instead pointing to the red backpack that Bull had brought with him from the ambulance.

Bull pressed his lips together. He had been watching Manoli the entire time as the doctor did everything in his power to help Sue. But neither the basic medicines in the ambulance backpack nor an energy-point massage had achieved much progress. As a result, the fight to improve her situation had become a fight to save her life over the past few minutes.

Eric had even injected half a milligram of adrenaline into the veins of her healthy arm. Sue had lost consciousness after the most recent transition, and it had taken a full ten minutes for her to wake up. Since then, her blood pressure had been dropping rapidly.

"How high is it now?" Bull asked.

"Her blood pressure?" Manoli checked the display on the sleeve he had wrapped around Sue's upper arm. "Seventy-five over forty."

Bull looked angrily at the helpless, fragile-looking girl lying in front of him on the floor, wrapped up in Bull's jacket to try and preserve her body temperature. The doctors had always told him his blood pressure was too high. One of them—had it even been Manoli?—had joked that Bull's systolic pressure would probably not drop below 100 even after his death.

"What can we do?" Sid asked worriedly.

"Noise," Bull murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say."

Bull bent down, took the two bowls in which Skelir had served them the tasteless gruel before, and threw them with all his might against the huge panorama window.

They fell clattering to the floor while the greenish content dripped slowly down the pane. Bull lifted the bowls and hit them against the glass several times. "I demand to speak to Skelir, or to someone else!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "We have an emergency here! Your Besun is in danger!"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Manoli wincing. The doctor turned around and indicated his patient with a beseeching expression. Bull nodded grimly at him and stomped off towards the connecting corridor, banging the two bowls together the entire time. He managed to keep it up for two minutes before returning to the others. Sue's eyes were half-open. Her lips were trembling, as if she was about to cry.

"How... What is happening to me?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

Bull knelt down by her side and brushed the strands of hair from her forehead. Her sweat was ice-cold.

"Everything's going to be fine, Sue," he said, his voice raspy. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"That's...good to know," she whispered. Then her eyes closed.

Bull stood up and pulled Manoli to one side. “How is she, Doc?” he whispered.

“Her blood pressure has dropped to sixty-four over thirty-three,” Manoli replied. “She should survive the next transition. But after that, things will get critical, Reg!”

Bull nodded. He knew what the doctor was trying to say when he emphasized the *Reg*. If the Fantan were no longer willing to come to them, Sid would have to jump with Sue to them. That might greatly increase the fragile girl’s chances of survival. On the other hand, there was no doubt about the fact that revealing Sid’s teleportation powers would severely limit their chances of successfully escaping, if it did not ruin them altogether.

Damn!

Bull blew out the air he had been holding in. There was only one morally right way to act, and they had perhaps waited too long already.

“Sid,” he said urgently. “Listen to me. I have a very important job for—”

Sid’s dark eyes, which had a second before been filled with a mixture of shock and determination, suddenly looked over Bull’s shoulder. Bull turned his head and saw the Fantan riding towards them on his strange machine.

He got up right away and took a few hurried steps towards the cylindrical being. It was Skelir, the Fantan who was missing some of his limbs.

“Listen to me and listen good, Skelir!” Bull said. His anger fired him on. He had to strive to not be even harder on the Fantan. “Sue Mirafiore is sick! While my other companions and I are getting more accustomed to the transitions, they are slowly but surely sucking the life out of her. Do you understand? Every new transition will bring her closer to death. You must stop flying any farther immediately!”

The cylindrical creature sat up straight on its hovering device. Several of the openings with its sensory organs were turned towards Bull. Waves of worried excitement seemed to pass over the fine scales on his body. However, Bull knew too little about Fantan physiognomy to know whether he was right about that or not. Had the information touched Skelir emotionally or was it merely a kind of Fantan hiccups attack?

Skelir moved the steering stick. The hover device moved past Bull and came to a stop where Sue was lying. Sid got up, folded his arms, and stared at the Fantan with his eyebrows drawn together. But he said nothing.

"Sue Mirafiore is Besun," Skelir finally said. Bull heard the words via the translator disk. "She is important to me because she is my Besun. But she is only one Besun among many, many Besun on the *Sregar-Nakut*. The others would not understand if my Besun got special attention. I'm already in a great deal of trouble because you damaged someone else's Besun, Reginald Bull."

Bull felt red-hot anger rise within him. "You are not honestly telling me that you are comparing Sue to all that junk you dragged up here?"

"What is junk?" Skelir curiously.

"Useless things!" Bull screamed. "Absolutely worthless..." He stopped, this wasn't getting him anywhere. There was no point whatsoever starting a discussion about the value of Besun, which would not achieve anything anyway. Fantan and humans obviously had very different value systems. Just as it was difficult to argue with another person about taste, it was a complete waste of time to start a conversation with a Fantan about the value of Besun.

"Skelir," he said, starting over. This time he spoke more quietly but more emphatically. "Sue will die if you pass through more transitions! And you will have that on your conscience because you could have prevented it!"

The Fantan hesitated briefly. "What is a conscience?" he wanted to know.

Bull sighed.

Manoli turned around and said, “If Sue dies, you will lose your Besun forever, Skelir. Do you want that?”

The Fantan turned around. He pointed two of his limbs at the doctor. They were shaking. Seconds passed. Bull resisted the almost overpowering temptation to grab the Fantan and shake him very hard.

Then Skelir pulled his arms quickly to his body. “I have an idea!” he announced, starting his machine and whizzing past Bull towards the exit.

Bull watched him go, his jaw hanging.

“Should I follow him?” Sid asked.

“No,” Manoli quickly interjected. “Wait, we—”

At that very same second, the next transition came. Sue let out a rattling sound. Her body twitched and shook violently.

Manoli cursed. Bull could not remember the last time he had heard the doctor, who was always extremely calm and collected, swear.

“Things are getting critical,” Manoli said.

Bull paced back and forth between his companions and the exit like a caged tiger. Several minutes had already passed since the transition. Sue had not yet regained consciousness.

Where was Skelir? Bull could not get rid of the uneasy feeling that the Fantan had lied to them when he’d said he had an idea. Was he only looking for a way to escape the unpleasant situation?

He suddenly heard steps behind him. Bull turned around and was astonished. A human being was standing in front of him. He was extremely emaciated and nearly half a meter taller than Bull. His thin white doctor’s coat only reached to just above his knees. It

did nothing to hide how skinny the person wearing it was. His left hand held a metallic case.

That's no human! Bull thought, surprised. He shook his head, but the strange apparition did not go away. "What... Who are you?"

"Fulkar is my name," the being said in an unfamiliar language, which Bull's translator translated without delay. "Where is the patient?" The words came out of the translator more fluently than the man was speaking.

Bull automatically took a step backwards. He had to tilt his head up to be able to see the stranger's face.

Fulkar looked at Bull with a slightly irritated expression and raised an eyebrow critically. Fascinated, Bull looked at the man's hairless pate, which was unusually tapered. Years ago he had seen a documentary about an island population that forced its children's heads into wooden frames so that they became conical in shape.

"Oh, there she is. Let me past; I'm a doctor!"

Bull stepped to one side.

"Thanks!"

The stranger teetered past Bull on his long legs and stood over Manoli. "You too. Take your unqualified hands from my patient and remove these anachronisms at once!" His spiderlike fingers pointed at the device for measuring blood pressure and the other instruments that Manoli had laid out within reach.

"First, I want to know what you plan to do," Manoli protested.

"I have already given you all the information you need," he retorted immediately. "Step back and let me do my work!"

"Do what he says, Eric," Bull said. "I think he's serious."

Manoli removed the blood pressure device, gathered up the other instruments and threw them into the open emergency backpack. Then he stood up and went over to Sid, who was following every

move of the stranger in disbelief.

Fulkar tapped his case twice. It unfolded itself and then divided into six differently sized elements. The man let go of the handle, and the segments flew over to Sue on their own. Two of them positioned themselves against her temples, two others hovered next to her chest, and the two last stopped just before the soles of her feet.

Like a maestro before his orchestra, Fulkar stretched his arms out, turned the palms of his hands upward, and slowly lifted his arms. Sue's body rose from the ground and floated up until she was at the same height as Fulkar's hips.

"How do you call the people that the patient belongs to?" the stranger asked as he activated the various sensors on the segments.

Bull swallowed. He felt as if somebody had a hand around his throat and was squeezing tightly. "We call ourselves humans. Terrans."

Fulkar turned around. His eyes were set very close together and positioned above a relatively small, but very crooked nose. "Are you from the same people?" he asked. "Interesting. At first glance I would have taken you for a degenerate Mehandor."

Fury flared up in Reginald Bull. While he didn't actually know what the stranger meant by his remarks, they were clearly not made as a compliment.

Fulkar didn't wait for an answer. He busily circled his patient and tapped away at the segments, which acted as hovering elements, an instrument case, and analytical devices all at the same time.

"What a joke!" the man murmured. "These Fantan are such barbarians. How could they be so thoughtless!"

"What do you mean?" Manoli asked coolly.

Without looking up, Fulkar answered, "The girl is dying. A life slips away and the world just stands and watches. And yet it is so

easy to save her."

He directed one of the head segments towards Sue's neck. There was a low hissing sound.

"So, that should suffice."

"What did you inject her with?" Manoli asked.

Fulkar looked up. "Let us be under no illusions," he said quietly. "Even if I revealed the composition of the serum to you, you would not have the slightest idea about what I have just done. Do you actually live in the mistaken belief that you are a doctor? I am certain your people finds itself at a place in your development where you still disfigure your patients with knives and then attempt to close the wounds with a needle and thread afterwards. I can see by the look on your face that I am right! Is that even a thing of possibility? To treat a patient like a piece of clothing!"

Manoli opened his mouth and then closed it again without saying a word. Although the doctor remained calm despite the situation, Bull had reached the end of his tether. He stomped up to Fulkar angrily and grabbed him by the arm.

"Now, listen to me, Doctor Beanpole! I want to know right this minute what game you think you're playing. What people do you belong to, and what function do you have on board this ship?"

Fulkar's head snapped round. His eyes looked threateningly at Bull. "Take your contaminated hand from my sleeve!" he hissed menacingly as he pulled himself up to his full height.

Bull did not let go. "Answer my questions immediately!"

"What people I belong to is fully irrelevant. Because I am Besun —just like you!" The words had barely escaped his lips before he hesitated. "However, I have special status. And, so it would seem, does my patient. Otherwise Skelir would not have offered me the strange deal he did."

"What deal?" Bull quickly asked.

“Something fully unprecedented. If I save this girl’s life, which I just have, then he wants to…” Fulkar’s eyes landed on Sue’s left arm. His mouth opened, and his upper lip peeled back as if he had just seen something disgusting. “What kind of…*barbarity* is that?”

He pointed reproachfully with his spiderlike index finger at Sue’s stump. “That is repugnant!”

Fulkar turned around and ran towards the exit. Before he had reached it, he stopped and shook his head as if he had just remembered something important. He lifted his right arm and snapped his fingers twice.

The hovering elements lifted Sue higher, glided over to Fulkar, and then followed him.

“Before Bull could react, Fulkar and his patient had already disappeared into the corridor.

15.

Allan D. Mercant

Before the Azores, August 2, 2036

"Good lord!" Mercant blurted out. "A ship. An Arkonide spaceship!"

His eyes widened as he stared at the huge circular mound whose metallic insides had been discovered by the Barracuda's sensors. The gigantic ship must have sunken into the seabed under its weight alone.

If we manage to revive it and get a crew on board, he thought, *then we could perhaps follow Rhodan and find out whether he's in trouble!*

"How do you know?" the German man asked him.

"Know what?"

"That it's an Arkonide ship, sir."

"Can you see its shape, Mister Frank? Wait a minute, I'll get the images onto the display in front of you." Mercant activated the screen that was installed in the backrest of Caroline's bucket seat. "The ship is sphere-shaped and it has a rim bulge along its equator. If Crest was not lying to us, only the Arkonides build ships like this."

"But just because the Arkonides are supposedly the only ones who build ships like this doesn't mean that they can't sell them to other people," Bernhard replied. "After all, I drive an American motorcycle and not a German one."

"Okay, Mister Frank. Half a point to you. It's true, we can't automatically assume that the Arkonides personally parked this ship down there. It could have been representatives of another civilization. But that changes nothing about the fact that it is, in all probability, an Arkonide spaceship."

“Was it actually parked here or did it crash? It doesn’t seem to be in a very good condition.”

Mercant turned around. He smiled grimly at the German. “We will hopefully find that out soon. Miss Frank? Can you sense exactly where the robot is?”

Caroline frowned with concentration. “I’m not sure,” she whispered. “I… I’m…”

“What’s wrong, Caro?” Bernhard asked in a worried tone. “Are you not feeling well?”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Mercant warned. “I know that using these powers takes up a lot of energy.”

Caroline sighed quietly as she rubbed her temples. “Something’s wrong. I believe we’re in the wrong place.”

“This is not the time for *believing,* Miss Frank. We’re searching for a robot that is *probably* Arkonide in origin, although Crest did not want to accept that. Thanks to you, we are tracking him, and we’ve found a ship that is very likely also from an Arkonide workshop or spaceport. You will notice, Miss Frank, that I’m speaking of likelihoods. So, how likely do you think it is that Rico, the robot we’re looking for, is in this spaceship?”

Caroline hid her face in her hands.

The radio crackled. “Mercant, we’re waiting for orders! We don’t want to give our target object the chance to defend himself by making our presence known to him!”

“But…”

“Computer, cut the connection!”

His voice broke off.

“So, Miss Frank. Please take your time to answer.”

She looked at him with feverish eyes. “That won’t be necessary. I

can't say whether I'm seventy or eighty percent certain, but I can *sense* that Rico is not here. Yet, we are very close..."

"Okay, Caroline. What direction should we proceed in?"

"Eastward..."

"That's the direction we came from."

"To the southeast," she corrected herself. "Towards the southeast."

"Thank you!"

Mercant turned again and reactivated the radio connection to the other Barracudas before issuing new orders. Two minutes later, he knew that Caroline was right.

"He's in there," she immediately confirmed.

"An illuminated dome on the floor of the Atlantic!" her father said. "That's unbelievable!"

Mercant said nothing. His heart beating wildly, he stared at the dome, which had several navigation lights on it. He asked himself how he could stand this moment without going crazy. How old might it be? And how many of them might there be on the floor of the world's oceans? Perhaps beneath the melted North Pole, in the deep-sea trenches? Were there other parked or crashed Arkonide spaceships on Earth?

"Orders?" a raspy voice coming from the radio said.

He Jian-Dong! Impatient to get started!

"Just a moment!"

Mercant activated various filters across the visual display of their surroundings. He had to somehow penetrate the darkness that was everywhere at 3,000 meters below sea level. In the infrared range, he could make out a weak dark-blue spot beside the glowing dots of the navigation lights. It was in an area in the lower section of the

dome. Mercant made the image larger and saw that part of the plants and sludge that covered the rest of the structure were missing there.

“Switch Trinity to the residual kinetic energy and shut down all non-vital systems,” he said into the radio. “Then follow me! I know where the airlock is.”

Pushed forward by the almost silent flywheels of the kinetik drive, Barracuda-1 swam towards the airlock. Before Mercant was able to think about what to do next, the huge door slid aside.

“Well, if that isn’t an invitation,” the former secret service agent said. Then he directed the barracuda into the opening.

Bernhard Frank

The inner airlock opened, providing a view of the hall within.

“How should we proceed?” Bernhard asked in an excited tone.

Mercant turned towards him. “One thing must be clearly understood—you two are to stay in the Barracuda until He Jian-Dong or I come to fetch you, or until we leave this place again. Is that clear?”

Caroline nodded. She felt very tired. Her father reluctantly nodded too. He, Bernhard Frank from Bavaria, was in the middle of what was possibly the greatest adventure of his life—and he was literally being shut out.

To the left and right of them, the Chinese soldiers were running past their barracuda. They stopped and waited in front of the opened airlock door, their guns aimed at potential targets in the hall.

“He Jian-Dong will now take over command,” Mercant said as he removed a gun from its holder next to his seat and did a quick function test. He then passed it to Bernhard. “For emergencies. Pray to God you won’t be needing it.”

Bernhard looked at the gun warily. “We are in a station with extraterrestrials,” he said. “How much help will a simple assault rifle be?”

Mercant had grabbed the last available weapon, checked it, and then paused for a second. A dark smile suddenly appeared on his lips.

“You’re right, Mister Frank. Or should I say, you would be right if this were a conventional assault rifle. But what you see here are still prototypes—a brand-new series of military innovations that Arkonide knowhow has presented us with. Do you see this long rod that stretches from the rear sight to the one at the front? It’s an Arkonide single-shot raygun. As the name says, it can only shoot once before it has to be reloaded. We hope to be able to produce more powerful energy storage options in future. This will have to do for now.”

“How... How do I fire it?”

“You don’t,” Mercant said coarsely. He opened the cockpit to the side. “You will use the weapon only as a threat, if at all! The best thing would be to sink down into your seats so low that you can’t be seen. This is not a matter for civilians.”

Mercant got out. The second he did so, his entire posture and the way he moved changed. He suddenly transformed into a hunter.

Bernhard was familiar with this kind of transformation. He had once had a tomcat that acted in exactly the same way as soon as he had left the comfort of the house where everything he ate came out of a tin and went on a foray into the wild.

Mercant hurried over to He Jian-Dong, and then they all disappeared into the adjacent hall. Bernhard and his daughter were left alone.

The airlock hatch closed. For a few seconds, father and daughter were immersed in inky blackness before the dim red emergency lighting came on. The sudden silence was painful.

Bernhard had been exposed to constant background noise for hours—the hasty preparations for the mission in Terrania, loading and flying in the supercopter, the screaming of the seagulls, and the howling of the wind as Mercant gave his instructions on the Portuguese beach. Then the humming, hissing, bubbling and low squeaking noises while they traveled on the Barracuda, the walls moving inwards and outwards rhythmically, and the rails moving while his seat remained in the same place.

And now absolute silence.

“Are you afraid?” Caroline asked.

He was happy about the question. Not necessarily about *what* his daughter had asked him, but about the fact that she *had* asked him.

“What gives you that idea?” he asked her, shocked to hear how tinny his voice sounded.

“You’re breathing very fast.”

“I’m a little...tense, that’s all.”

“I don’t understand why they took so many weapons with them. Do they want something to happen?”

“A precautionary measure,” Bernhard answered, but he wasn’t very convinced of that himself. “An unfamiliar robot could be potentially dangerous. Better safe than sorry, as the Americans say.”

“Exactly. Empty phrases and preemptive strikes are an ideal means to an end.”

“You’re right. I don’t like it either that He Jian-Dong is in charge down here and not Mister Mercant.”

A minute passed, a minute in which Bernhard listened to the rhythm of his breathing and the beating of his heart.

Caroline spoke suddenly. “I can sense something.”

“What, exactly?”

She started to get out of her seat. “We have to get out of here! We must go to *him.*”

16.

Tako Kakuta

Prison camp, Ferrolia

Anne Sloane was inconsolable. She held on to the dead body of Rod Nyssen, stroking his hair, weeping all the time. Kakuta and Morozova stood next to her, helpless.

Hermot was being looked after by his companions. They spoke with him and gave him water from a small bowl. With his typical overbearing manner, he shook his arms and hands and got up, groaning as he moved.

Nyssen—with the help of Sloane's telekinetic powers—had beat him up pretty badly. A mixture of blood and saliva dribbled out of his mouth. Several bumps and scrapes were visible on his head, and his left eye was swollen shut. His entire body was covered in blackish-blue bruises.

He hobbled over to them. One of his companions wanted to support him, but he merely shoved her away.

Sloane looked up, her eyes full of tears. "You... You monster," she blurted out. "I'll crush you like an insect!"

"I want to pay my last respects to him," the Ferron man said through swollen lips. "I won the fight. But he was a strong opponent. He would have deserved victory."

Kakuta stiffened. "Your victory was not honorable," he said coolly. "You poisoned our friend while you were already lying on the ground, beaten."

"It was a fight without rules," the Ferron stressed.

"It would be better if you left us alone," Kakuta responded. "The fighting must end. And I cannot guarantee your safety if you don't leave us in peace."

“The fighting is over. None of us will bother you again. But now we must give the dead man an honorable funeral and we must take him into us.”

Sloane jerked her head upwards. “Are you off your head?” she screamed. “That’s out of the question. Rod is not going to be cut up and burned!”

Hermot looked at her, astounded. He spread his arms out, obviously perturbed. “He is a Ferron. He has earned an honorable funeral.” He hesitated. “What planet are you from, if you don’t want to carry out the smoke ceremony?”

“Of course we will carry out the smoke ceremony,” Morozova said. “But we have to gather ourselves first. It is not easy to accept the passing of a friend.”

“I understand that,” Hermot answered in a dull tone.

“Go and prepare everything!” Kakuta commanded. “We will join you as soon as we’re ready.”

Hermot lifted both arms, turning the palms of his hands towards them. “So it will be.” He turned to his companions. “You heard! Start a fire and get the ceremonial knife for me.”

“Have you lost your minds?” Sloane cried, her voice shaking with rage. “Rod is hardly gone from us and you want to bury him?”

“Anne!” Daria said gently. “There’s nothing more you can do for him.”

She touched the woman on the shoulder and pulled her up slowly. Sloane shook off Morozova’ss hand, bent down, and kissed Nyssen on the mouth. Then she let Morozova bring her back to their spot in the camp.

Conrad Deringhouse had woken up in the meantime and, confused, asked what was going on. Morozova explained to him. Tears ran down his face as he heard the terrible story. Kakuta knew that the two had been good friends.

“Why didn’t you stop it?” Deringhouse asked weakly. “Why didn’t you intervene?”

“Everything happened very fast,” Sloane said. Her lips were quivering. “But it has nothing to do with the fight. Rod wanted to fight. He did it for us. The Ferron is not the one to blame for Rod’s death. Tako is responsible for everything!” She looked at Kakuta, an expression of bitter accusation on her face. “We had so many opportunities to escape, but he waited and waited until it was too late! He has Rod on his conscience!”

“No,” Morozova gently said. “That’s not true. If we’d had the chance to escape, Tako would have been the first to do whatever was necessary. But we haven’t had a single opportunity to flee!”

“Lies!” Sloane screamed. “Now you lot stick together, and I’m…alone.”

She covered her face with her hands and sank slowly to the ground. Morozova sat down next to her, took her in her arms, and gently stroked her hair. “It was a chain of unfortunate circumstances. Rod didn’t want to die; he took on that risk for all of us.”

“And now you want to take part in that barbarian ritual,” Anne sobbed. She was shaking all over.

“You heard Rod,” Morozova said. “He liked the idea of the smoke ceremony. I think he would be pleased if we did it for him.”

“And they think we’re Ferrons here,” Kakuta added, treading very carefully. “It wouldn’t look good if we refused to carry out the ceremony.”

Sloane snapped her head up to look at him. “Shut your damn mouth, Tako!” she screamed in his face. “One more word from you and I’ll crush your cold heart!”

Kakuta pressed his lips together and looked down at the ground.

“Did you hear me?” Sloane screamed. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Hai,” Kakuta replied quietly.

Then he turned away so that the others could not see his tears.

The ceremony began two hours later.

In accordance with Ferron custom, Hermot had cut Nyssen’s body into pieces and wrapped them in cloth. A bright fire was burning in a fire pit.

Hermot took the first bundle and threw it onto the flames. Then he bent over it and breathed in the smoke.

Morozova was next. Kakuta saw that she had to steel herself before taking one of the bundles and throwing it onto the fire. Just as Hermot had done, she bent over the flames and breathed in the smoke.

Kakuta was next. He had seen dozens of body parts in the Fukushima prefecture, and yet he still found it difficult to pick up one of the pieces and give it over to the flames. He waited, then bent over the fire pit and breathed in the smoke, thinking about Rod Nyssen as he did so. With every breath, he felt like he was taking in a piece of his companion.

After some time, he stepped back and took a bow before the flames and then returned to their place in the camp, where Deringhouse and Sloane were watching from a distance.

Suddenly the hatch opened, and several Topsidans came in. Kakuta immediately recognized the lizardman in the front. It was the one with the striking red eye-patch who had stopped the slaughter in the hospital and permitted Deringhouse’s life to be saved. The Topsidan stopped and folded his arms, watching the smoke ceremony in silence.

Anne Sloane looked up. She was shaking. “Monsters,” she murmured. “Nothing but monsters everywhere!” She got up, stretched her right hand out, and moved the fingers as if she were trying to choke someone.

Before Kakuta could say anything, Morozova was beside her and pushed her arm down.

“You’re not helping anyone with that!” she whispered. “Leave it to me.”

The former cosmonaut went up to the Topsidans. Two of them raised their weapons, but the one with the eyepatch, who had been addressed as “Wise One” in the hospital, raised his hand, and the guns were lowered again. That relieved the tension.

Kakuta looked on in amazement as Morozova spoke to the Topsidan. A few minutes later, the Wise One turned to the two soldiers accompanying him and they retreated. Then he spoke again with Morozova.

Kakuta would have liked to have known what she was talking to him about. It didn’t look like a discussion between a guard and a prisoner; it was almost like a discussion…*between equals,* he thought.

“Come on, Anne,” Deringhouse said. “It’s our turn. You’ll have to help me; I can’t manage it alone.”

“What?” she blurted out. “I don’t want anything to do with that ceremony!”

Deringhouse smiled sadly. “Are you sure? I think Rod would have liked you to.”

Sloane opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something. Then she grabbed Deringhouse beneath his arms and helped him to his feet.

They staggered towards the fire pit. Kakuta followed them in case Deringhouse collapsed.

The pair took one of the wrapped bundles and placed it onto the fire. The flames engulfed it right away, and smoke wafted up.

“Take a deep breath!” Deringhouse whispered. “Rod will always be with you.”

17.

Rico

The underwater dome,

August 2, 2036

Since awakening in the desert, Rico could not shake off the feeling that he was incomplete. It had taken hours and days until he was physically regenerated enough to “function” again. His robotic-biological parts had been restored, but to really *heal* them he needed a longer, more intensive process supported by the right specialists or machines. He had never really regained his balance.

And now *they* had arrived. Now, of all times. He knew the humans—in some ways better than he knew himself. He admired their inventiveness, their curiosity, their longing for the undiscovered.

On the other hand, he also knew how cynical they could be when it came to gaining an advantage. The humans got rid of anything in the world that stood in their way. Sometimes the way they were brought up and their unstable mental state led them to forget that they could achieve a great deal more as a collective than as individuals.

If a human had the opportunity to get a hold of ten pieces of gold alone while his fellow humans got nothing, he would not form a group with the others to obtain thirty gold pieces for the group by working together. Why should he have five gold pieces when he could have ten? In what way would he benefit if everyone had a few gold pieces? How would that bring him fulfillment? How would that help him develop as an individual?

This drive for fulfillment, wealth, and victory couldn’t even be explained by influences from the outside. People were people; it was as simple as that. Rico knew this lack of logic in their desire to achieve. He *knew* that they had not come into the underwater dome

to act in accordance with his needs and wishes. They were here to achieve goals, to get rich, to destroy what might put them and their goals at risk. Right now, when it was Rico's job to solve the most important puzzle of all. Right now, when he could have made himself complete by using the station's internal data to find out what was wrong with him, to find out what information he was lacking. To find out what had happened to *him*. *He* should have been there.

The emotions he felt as he saw the armed intruders on the surveillance monitors would have incited nothing but hatred in a human or an Arkonide.

"What should we do?" Quiniu asked.

"It's all wrong," he replied. *"He* should have been here. Instead, *they're* here. We even led them straight here. That's wrong. The station must not fall into their hands. We must hold it in order to..."

Rico stopped himself from talking further. He had nearly said too much. He didn't fully trust Quiniu Soptor. The less she knew, the less damage she could potentially cause. It was not up to Rico to decide who should be in the know and who shouldn't.

He turned around and ran to the arsenal. The chamber was integrated into one of the rear walls. The robot transmitted the code, and the apparently seamless wall slid a couple of centimeters inwards and then to the side.

"Who built this station?" Quiniu asked. "Was it you? Did you create this arsenal?"

The woman was remarkably intelligent, Rico had to admit to himself yet again. She was able to grasp the connections between things quickly.

"What are you going to do?"

Again, he did not answer. He reached for the metal loops on the weapons and pulled them over his wrists. Contact rods immediately sank into his flesh and connected to his metal skeleton and energy

supply.

“Do you intend to defend the station?” Quiniu asked. “Would it not be better to seek dialogue? We still don’t know why the intruders are here.”

He grabbed a protective shield generator and hooked it to his belt. The automatic system activated immediately. It carried out a functional test, followed a few seconds later by a beeping sound that signaled it was ready. It had its own energy cell and operated self-sufficiently.

“That’ll not be necessary,” he answered. “I know their motives, and they go against mine.”

Quiniu closed the helmet of her battledress. “Can I also have additional weapons?”

Rico looked over at her. He briefly calculated the probability of the potential consequences. Then he grabbed a grenade and handed it to her.

“What can I do with that? How do I activate it?”

He pointed to the markings at the place between the upper and lower half of the small spherical grenade. “You turn it until the two markings are aligned with one another. They will tell you how long until the explosion and how strong the detonation will be.”

Rico pointed at the individual symbols and explained which one referred to time and which one to intensity. Then he closed the arsenal again. The panel fell back into place. If the intruders happened to make it this far, they wouldn’t even be able to find the chamber using hollow-space sensors.

He looked at Quiniu Soptor. “I will defend the station!” he said, adding, “you will stay in the background and only intervene if I order you to!”

“Rico, I...” she began.

But the robot had already turned away and was now hurrying to

counter the intruders.

Allan D. Mercant

Mercant entered the disk-shaped ship. It looked exactly like the flying saucers the media and cheap films had always depicted. He was suddenly overcome again with a sense of deep respect—something he had experienced a few times over the past days and weeks when confronted with the amazing technology of the Arkonides.

The disk measured about fifteen by three meters. A transparent pilot's cabin stretched up in the middle of the space where he was standing. There were four spheres on the outer walls, each of them arranged at 90 degrees to one another. Mercant assumed they held the drives.

He stretched out his hand and felt the cool metal beneath his fingers. Then he showed the others the palm of his hand. It was wet.

"They came here with this disk," Mercant said.

He Jian-Dong stepped towards him. "We don't know what possibilities the robot has in this environment. We should not take any risks."

"Listen to me and listen good," Mercant whispered. "I'll say it only once. Rico is just as important to us as this station is. I don't want either him or the station to sustain any damage because of heavy-handedness."

"I do not know this term *heavy-handedness*," Jian-Dong answered, unmoved by Mercant's words.

The former agent tried to read the soldier's expression. An inner voice was screaming to him that it had been a mistake to entrust Bai Jun's former adjutant with such a difficult task. Another voice told him that he was racist, caught up in obsolete structures. He's face remained expressionless.

“Instruct your people to proceed carefully,” he warned him.

The words had hardly left his mouth when the lighting in the hall was suddenly extinguished. Within a fraction of a second, they were plunged into darkness. He Jian-Dong barked out a command that Mercant did not understand.

They heard a scraping sound, then a ray of light about as thick as a finger burned into his retina. Something hissed. Mercant heard a thud and then a scream. One of the soldiers burst into flames. A high, wailing scream rebounded off the walls of the hangar, mixed with the hissing of more volleys of energy and the first shot from their assault rifles.

“Take cover!” Mercant yelled.

He Jian-Dong screamed more orders, but his voice seemed to already be several meters away.

Mercant let himself drop to the ground, pressed his weapon to his body, and rolled over several times with his elbows tucked in until he hit something hard.

The disk. He raised his weapon and tried to identify the flashing barrels of the guns in the darkness and the soldiers who were also crawling along the floor, trying helplessly to put out the flames. The horrible stench of burned flesh spread in through the air.

Jian-Dong gave more orders. Shortly after that, sparks started spraying at different places in the hangar. They burst into fist-sized green flames. His people had lit torches.

A tall figure became visible. It was holding both arms out straight and emitting energy rays from its wrists.

Rico!

The rattle of the assault rifles echoed thunderously off the walls. Cursing, Mercant reached towards his head and pushed his ear plugs deeper in.

“Cease fire!” he yelled. “For God’s sake, stop shooting!”

He couldn't even hear his own words. It was too loud, too chaotic in the hangar. Men and women screamed while Rico's energy volleys hissed through the air, rebounding here and there. A smoke-like mist spread everywhere, giving the scene an even more threatening atmosphere.

Mercant wiped tears out of his eyes. Rico remained standing in exactly the same spot. He looked like a god of vengeance who had descended to Earth to let humanity feel his ire. The air around his body flickered. Spots of light lit up again and again before disappearing again just as fast. Mercant realized that the robot was protected by an energy shield which their projectiles could not penetrate.

Another soldier was hit, and his body immediately went up in flames.

"This is madness!" Mercant yelled to the former adjutant. "Order your people to surrender!"

He didn't know whether He Jian-Dong had heard him. Rico started moving, coming closer step by step, walking straight towards Mercant.

Bernhard Frank

"Stay here, Caro!" Bernhard hissed. "What's going on out there has nothing to do with us!"

At that moment, they heard a muffled scream followed by the rattle of a weapon.

"He's lost something," Caroline repeated. She loosened the belt of her seat. "We... I must go to him immediately. Maybe I can stop this madness!"

She opened the cockpit and pushed it to one side. Bernhard wanted to grab her by the shoulder but his belt held him back. He cursed, then found the opening mechanism and released it.

Caroline jumped out of the craft. Her father followed and

grabbed her wrist from behind.

“Wait!” he ordered.

“Paps!” She turned towards him. “We are all in this sítuation because of me. I said A, so now I have to say B! I think I can help! Let me go!”

“Dammit!” he said, incensed by the predicament they found themselves in. “What do you mean, you can help?”

“Let me go, Paps!”

Bernhard saw the sparkling eyes of his daughter in the dull red of the emergency lighting. A deep wrinkle had formed above the bridge of her nose. Her cheeks were glowing.

“You and your damned stubbornness, Caro. You’ll get us killed!”

He got up, still holding on tightly to his daughter’s wrist. “We’ll go together. You and I.”

“Paps!”

“Stop all your ‘Paps’! I will accompany you, no matter what you intend to do. Don’t contradict me!”

Rico

The intruders had not prepared very well for their mission. They did the best they could under the circumstances, seeking cover behind support columns and in corners. But they didn’t have a chance against his energy weapons. They didn’t even have protective shield generators.

One of the attackers went over to Quiniu’s recon craft. He might have only be seeking protection, but Rico didn’t want to take any risks. The craft promised him mobility, and he didn’t want to lose that.

He walked calmly towards the man. Unlike the other attackers,

this one did not shoot at Rico. Because he was busy manipulating the ship? Rico noticed a movement out of the corner of his right eye as the interior airlock door slid open. He slowly turned his head.

A stocky man and a slender woman were standing in the airlock. He could see a look of horror in the woman's eyes as she took in the scene. Rico lifted his right arm with the weapon attached to it. The automatic target picked up on the two figures. Rico saw that the man was carrying a weapon, but that it was pointed towards the floor. From everything he observed, the robot realized that the two did not have any military function.

Why are they here?

The woman moved her lips. Because the weapons were so loud, despite multiple filters, he still could not hear what she was saying. But he was able to translate her lip movements into words.

Stop, the woman was saying. *I know where you should look. I can help you find him.*

Rico lowered his arm. His Positronic calculated the probability that the woman could know what he was looking for. It was close to zero. He fought with himself for a moment. Then his biological part won—his *feelings.*

He ran to Quiniu's recon craft, grabbed the man who had been hiding behind it, and threw him against the nearest wall. Then, without reducing speed for a second, he turned and headed for the woman. Before she or her companion could react, he had grabbed her and hurried off with her in the direction of the station interior. He needed time. He had to speak with this woman!

All of a sudden, two of the intruders appeared between him and the entrance to the interior. Rico did not shoot at them. He would just run right through them.

They lifted their weapons. His remote optical analysis system compared the image with the data he had been collecting the entire time. He knew the weapons. Modified SIG with a caliber of 6.5 millimeters. The projectiles were made of both metal and ceramic.

Hundreds of them had already burned up on his protective shield.

Rico only realized his mistake when one of the two figures pressed his thumb on the side of the handgun. Only now did he identify the thin rod on the top. They were energy weapons.

Too late to lift up his arm, he pressed the young woman's body closer towards him and transmitted an order by radio to the protective shield generator.

And then they were engulfed in a wall of flame.

18.

Sid González

The Fantan Ship

The jumps cost Sid a great deal of energy. At the same time, he had never felt so good in his life. *He* had discovered the hangar with the auxiliary craft. *He* had been the one bringing Reginald Bull to one of those ships again and again for the past three days so that he could familiarize himself with the steering and the ship's functions. And *he* was the one who, after many failed attempts, had found the small sickbay deep in the belly of the *Sregar-Nakut*, where Sue was being treated by the strange doctor Fulkar.

He was now carrying out their final preparations. Bull had told him that "if everything went well," he would be able to apply the Arkonide steering principles he had learned so far to the spindle ship's auxiliary craft.

"We'll only have one chance, so we have to make the best of that opportunity," Bull had said, and then added, "We've been lucky so far that the Fantan obviously don't have security cameras. We have to be careful not to become too cocky just because we feel sure of ourselves. The best plans often fail because of the stupidest things."

When he said the word "cocky", Bull glanced sideways at Sid, as if he was the only one who could endanger their plans! Had Bull forgotten who he had to thank for the discovery of the auxiliary craft in the first place?

Bull had even gone over his head when naming the escape ship. Sid had suggested *Suerta*, the Spanish word for "good fortune." Bull wanted a somewhat more adventurous name and had decided on *Arsene Lupin* after a supposedly famous master thief.

Sid didn't understand. How many people had told him off in his life or had eyed him disapprovingly because of his past as a thieving street kid? If he had continued his career—and his powers

of teleportation would literally have opened every door for him—would somebody one day have named their spaceship *Chico* or *Sid Gonzalez*?He shook his head, annoyed.

“Sid,” a voice whispered, “are you dreaming?”

The teleporter whirled around. Dr. Manoli was standing in the doorway to the corridor that led away from the storage room where they had spent most of their time until now.

Manoli checked that the corridor was secure, in case a visitor suddenly turned up. If that happened, Sid would have to be quick, teleporting as fast as possible into the *Arsene Lupin* and bringing Bull back before somebody noticed he was missing.

That was why Sid spent most of his time keeping a lookout. He was only released from this duty when it was time to sleep, when he visited Sue, or when Bull was in the *Lupin*.

“You look tired,” the doctor noted.

Sid gave a dismissive gesture which, however, wasn’t quite as convincing as he had imagined it in his head.

“How far is Reg now?” Manoli asked.

“He thinks he can steer the ship.”

“Has he started it at least once to try out that theory?”

Sid shook his head. “No. Reg says the Fantan would notice if the *Lupin’s* systems were activated, despite their differences concerning security policy.”

Manoli smiled. “So, the Fantan have ‘differences’ in security policy? Don’t you mean deficits?”

Sid felt his face redden. “Yes, that’s exactly what Reg said. Sorry!”

The doctor reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of cellophane. He folded it. It contained the tiny

remainders of an energy bar.

“It won’t give you much energy, son,” he said apologetically. “Look at it as more of a lucky charm.”

Sid studied it with a critical eye. “But I’m allowed to eat it, right?”

“As a doctor, I insist that you do.”

Sid took the food from Manoli. Five seconds later the chewed up remains of the energy bar were already on their way to his stomach.

Manoli looked at his watch. “It’s time,” he said. “But every move must work perfectly.”

Sid nodded seriously.

Manoli bent down, picked up the red emergency backpack, and slipped it on. “I’m ready if you are.”

Sid took a deep breath, counted slowly to five, took hold of Manoli’s lower arm, concentrated on the control center of the *Arsene Lupin*...and jumped.

They landed exactly where he’d wanted to. The control center of the escape ship was not quite eight meters across and it was circular. The commander sat in the middle while the workstations and the different monitors were attached to the walls. If the commander wanted access to any of the stations, he could be moved there easily. This made it possible, in emergencies, to have the ship piloted by one person.

Bull, who was sitting in a white, very comfortable-looking armchair, jumped slightly as the cloud of sparks materialized right in front of him. It was the first time Sid had seen the chair. Before that, there had been a kind of frame in the middle of the control center that had been adapted to the body size of the Fantan.

The stocky Terran with the flaming red beard quickly regained his composure. He stood up and spread his arms theatrically. “Welcome! You’re in the *Arsene Lupin*, Terrania’s newest ship!”

Eric Manoli took a look around, and an appreciative whistle passed his lips. “So this is what a ship looks like five minutes before launch!”

“Everything is timed precisely, Eric.” Bull pulled his pod out of his pants pocket and pointed at the display, which had a line and several diagonal strokes across it. “Look here; as the *Arsene Lupin* is not only an auxiliary craft but also a rescue ship, it can be activated within a few minutes. According to my calculations, in exactly three minutes and twenty seconds—or in two hundred seconds. That means the countdown begins precisely when I activate the main switch here.”

Bull pointed to the beginning of the line. “You, Sid, will jump into the sick bay and get Sue. If Fulkar is with her and Sue still needs his care, then bring him with you. Eric, your job will be to activate the emergency switch for the external hatch of the *Sregar-Nakut* after precisely one minute and forty seconds. That’s the yellow lever over there. We will simulate an emergency launch—which is why I have submitted a little prayer to the Almighty that He ensure the Fantan don’t notice what’s going on during the hundred seconds it takes for the external hatch to open. Or that if they do notice, then because of the clever programming of their security system, they can’t prevent the emergency opening of the hatch or reverse the process.”

Bull looked Sid and Manoli in the eyes. “Do you understand what I want you to do?”

Sid looked at him, briefly irritated, then nodded eagerly.

Manoli forced his face into a controlled smile. “As your personal physician, I must give you the same advice that you are always offering our young friend here: Courage is good. But recklessness can mean risking everything.

Bull sighed theatrically. “You’re feeling optimistic for the first time in days and then the doctor starts to worry. Maybe I should ask Dr. Haggard if he has a free appointment.”

“Do that, Reg,” Manoli said calmly. “As soon as you have

brought us back to Terrania in one piece."

Bull saluted. "Aye, aye, Doc!"

He turned around and opened a bright yellow flap on the terminal located on the right arm of his chair. There was a button underneath it, and he pressed it without a moment's hesitation.

The control center of the *Arsene Lupin* started buzzing to life. Monitors lit up, the terminals pushed out upholstered rings that they could either sit on or lean against.

Bull turned around and looked at Sid. "What are you waiting for? The countdown is running—you're supposed to be in the sick bay already!"

Sid looked at him in shock for a heartbeat, then he pulled himself together, closed his eyes, and teleported.

Afterwards, Sid could not say why he had made the mistake. Had he not paid enough attention to the location? Had he not concentrated hard enough? Or were there other reasons for the fact that his jump was slightly off?

Whatever it was, he did not materialize in the sick bay, but in the wide corridor that led into Fulkar's quarters. Two Fantan were standing right in front of him.

The teen was gripped by icy fear. He felt as if his insides had frozen, it was so cold. He stared at the two cylindrical beings as a thousand things went through his mind. What should he do? Flee? Attack? Both?

When the Fantan showed no reaction after what seemed like an eternity, Sid quietly hoped that the sensory holes on the upper edge of their sides were only the equivalent of ears and noses and that he had not yet been discovered. He stepped carefully backwards.

"We can see you, human," one of them said. "What do you want here...and where did you come from?"

The same questions ran through his mind again and again like a

carousel. *Flee? Attack? Attack and then flee?*

One of the Fantan lifted a silver box and aimed it at Sid. His eyes widened as he stared at the dainty object, which seemed out of place in the alien's grip.

At the very same moment, a dull tone that reminded Sid of a huge bell could be heard. The roaring became a finer tone that oscillated.

"Oh," the Fantan said, lowering the box again. "There he is already."

It took Sid a second to understand what had happened. *He had set off the alarm!* He intuitively closed his eyes. The Fantan said something, but he was no longer listening.

He teleported. In the very same second, he saw the giant, emaciated man. He was bending over Sue, and he must have seen Sid's sparks. The doctor jumped into the air—faster than Sid would have thought him capable of.

"How... Where..."

Reacting quickly, Sid turned around and saw that the entrance to the sick bay was open. He ignored the lethargy that had overcome him after jumping three times in such a short period. Taking three large steps, he reached the door and activated the closing mechanism.

He briefly saw the two Fantan at the other end of the corridor. They were pointing their extremities at the spot where he had been standing just a second ago. Then he closed the two halves of the door.

"How did you get in here so fast?" Fulkar asked.

"I haven't got time for explanations," Sid blurted out. He was swaying slightly and had to support himself on the closed door. "Go! We can't lose any time!"

"What's going on? Why don't we have time?"

“We have to get out of here. The Fantan have set off the alarm!”

The skinny doctor with the strangely tapered head looked at him aghast. “‘Out of here’? Have you lost your mind?”

“We’ve found a way to escape from the ship,” he called out as he stumbled on unsteady legs towards the doctor and Sue. “Hurry up! I don’t want to be Besun! And I can take you with me.”

The man pressed both fists against his hips and stood up to full height. “Why would I want that? I would never get as much respect on Aralon as I get here. Why should I give that up when there’s no need?”

Sid shook his head, confused. He realized he had very little time to get back to the *Arsene Lupin*. How many seconds had already passed? Fifty? A hundred, even?

“Then I’ll go without you.” He stretched his hand out to Sue, who was floating in the air in front of Fulkar. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully. “What… What’s with Sue? Is she okay?”

“Of course she’s okay,” the doctor said with an irritated undertone that even the translator picked up on. “The treatment against the transition shocks, as expected, has been a success. The patient will have no more problems with them from now on. But—”

The lanky man stopped talking as the door to the sick bay swung open. Sid whipped around. The two Fantan were standing in the entrance.

“Don’t move, Besun!” one of them called out. “We will use our weapons if necessary to make sure you don’t disappear again!”

Sid looked hastily from the Fantan back to Sue and Fulkar. “What?” he asked. A sense of panic rose up within him. “What did you want to say? There was a ‘but’ in there!”

“Her arm,” Fulkar said, his horribly skinny finger pointed to the body part he was referring to. “I have—”

“Get away from there, Besun!” came a cry from the entrance. “Or

I'll shoot!"

Sid grabbed Sue's right shoulder. He stretched out his other hand to Fulkar. "I have to jump! Are you coming or not?"

The emaciated doctor drew his hand back as if it had been burned.

"Thank you!" Sid blurted out. "For everything!"

The last thing Sid saw before he disappeared was the doctor's face distorted with surprise and fear. A second later he was back in the *Arsene Lupin*.

"Finally!" Bull called out in relief.

Sid reacted fast to catch Sue's body. The hoverfield that had kept her floating before no longer worked in the control center. He crashed to the floor with his companion, overcome by exhaustion, which spread through his body like liquid lead.

"Eric," he heard Bull's voice say from far away, "look after these two; I've got my hands full here!"

While Manoli kneeled down next to Sue and checked her pulse, Sid felt the ground beneath him vibrate. Reginald Bull had actually managed to get the ship moving!

Sid did not want to miss this moment. Gathering every ounce of strength he had left, he came to his knees and got up slowly. He watched the *Arsene Lupin* gliding through the hangar. The external airlock had opened before them. But only halfway.

"Damn!" Bull yelled angrily. "It's closing again! It's going to be very tight!"

Shocked, Sid looked at the rectangle cutout showing outer space getting steadily smaller as the airlock slid shut. He immediately saw that Bull was mistaken; it wasn't going to be tight—there was no way the *Arsene Lupin* was going to make it through!

The boy staggered. His strength was running out. He had

prepared for this maneuver for three days and now it was going to fail. Because of him? Had he waited too long to fetch Sue from the sickbay? Had he messed everything up?

Bull cursed loudly as the ship moved steadily towards the shrinking opening. Sid noticed the yellow lever, which Bull had said would open the exterior hatch in an emergency. Dr. Manoli had pressed it as instructed.

Sid suddenly had an idea. An unbelievably simple idea. He now felt completely calm, knowing what he had to do. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

And then he jumped.

He materialized in the control center. It was pitch black. His legs went from under him, and he fell to the floor.

Not now! He thought in desperation. *I have to get this done!*

He gathered every last bit of strength he could muster and somehow managed to get to his knees, crawling as fast as he could. He suppressed the terrible thought that he had made a mistake again and hadn't landed in the control center of the other auxiliary craft, but somewhere else. In a machine room or inside some sanitary facility. He had one chance and he had to use it!

He bumped into a wall. Reaching upwards, he managed to get hold of an edge of some kind and used it as leverage to pull himself up. His fingers felt an oval board that had a number of sensor recesses on it.

His thoughts were racing. Which of the terminals looked like that in the control center of the *Arsene Lupin*? He gave himself one or two seconds to think it over. The blood was pounding painfully in his ears.

Then he knew. *To the right! I need to go to the right!*

His arms stretched out, he felt his way around as fast as his wobbly knees would allow him, past the large monitor, then to another work terminal, another screen, and then...

His shaking hands found the lever, and he pulled it with all his strength. It gave way with a heavy *clack* and tilted downward. A blinding yellow light lit up next to the lever.

Sniveling, Sid slid to the ground. He had managed it! He had found the lever for the external hatch in the control center of the other auxiliary craft! He lifted his hands, brought his fingers together, and prayed to Mary, Mother of God, that his companions would succeed in getting through.

Then everything became very still. Sid realized that he would be left behind in the Fantan ship. Strangely, he did not feel sadness or disappointment or anger. Things were good. What he had done had helped—*please, please, let it work!*—Sue, Bull, and Manoli to escape from the clutches of the Fantan, and they would not end up as Besun.

He slowly let out the air he had been holding in. He felt the comforting warmth of his triumph. It burned like a flame in his chest.

Reginald Bull

Where had the boy disappeared to? And more importantly, *what the devil had he done?*

It must have been only a few centimeters remaining. Bull was about to drive the *Arsene Lupin* between the hatch and the wall in the desperate hope that they would be able to break through that way and escape.

Then the hatch had suddenly stopped moving and started opening again! The ship scraped past the edge. Metal screeched against metal—and then they were outside.

Bull let out a scream of triumph. Now, where was the boy?

“Sid!” Manoli called out. The voice of the otherwise calm and collected doctor was shaking with relief. “I was starting to get seriously worried about whether we would have to fly back in and

get you."

"I... Have I... Did we do it?" Sid asked, unable to hide his exhaustion.

"Yes, you did it," the doctor said.

Bull looked out into space. The screen began filling up with white dots, with one single fat dot in the middle. The other reflexes swarmed around it like bees around a hive. Behind that, a much larger rangefinder reflex shone out.

Bull's euphoria dissipated immediately. The feeling of extreme joy froze like the flow of water in the icy cold of a Siberian winter.

"What a disaster," he murmured.

He let go of both the joysticks he was using to steer the *Arsene Lupin*. He never thought he would ever see so many space objects so close to one another. The huge rangefinder reflex was a planet. A gigantic space station was floating in its orbit, slowly turning on its own axis. Hundreds, no—thousands—of spaceships buzzed around it. Several dozen had already noticed the presence of the *Arsene Lupin* and were now circling them.

Bull knew when the game was over. As overwhelming and fascinating as the sight of spaceships gliding through the blackness of space was, it told him one thing, and its message was very clear: they had lost.

19.

Quiniu Soptor

Underwater dome,

August 2, 2036

She had watched the fighting in the hangar breathlessly. The Quilran feathers emitted a secretion that calmed her to some extent.

Then came the moment when the situation changed all at once. The airlock hatch slid open. After a brief moment of hesitation, Rico ran in the direction of the recon craft, then to the hatch. When he got there, he packed a slim figure and, holding her, moved in Quiniu's direction.

Before he had reached the corridor, two of the intruders appeared and shot at him. *Using energy weapons!*

Quiniu was so shocked that she was paralyzed for a moment. Where had the humans gotten a hold of weapons like that?

A thought suddenly occurred to her that was only too logical: *Crest!* How could the old man do something so foolish? She now knew that it had been the right decision not to contact him and to follow her own path instead.

Rico's protective shield flickered. She did not know whether he was aware of the disaster facing him. In any case, he did not stop running or slow down but crashed at full speed into his two attackers who—like two toy figures—bounced off the burning ball in which the robot and woman were hidden.

The intruders crashed into the walls. Their uniforms were burning, set alight by their own fire, which had rebounded.

Rico's protective shield collapsed completely. Something smoking shot past Quiniu at ultra-Arkonide speed. She activated the flight element in her spacesuit and flew after him.

Rico did not stop until he was in front of the entrance of the deep-sleep facility. He was swaying.

The young woman freed herself from his arms with a sigh and sank to the ground.

The robot looked dreadful. A large part of his bio-shell was charred. Flashing metal parts protruded between dark shreds of flesh. The woman had also suffered burns but nothing nearly as serious as the robot. Had he manipulated the protective shield in such a way that it had drawn itself around the woman while Rico was exposed to the full blast of energy with minimal protection?

“Rico!” she called out. “What should I do?”

The robot turned around. All that was left of the right side of his face were patches of skin and flesh sticking to metal. The eye looked like a hard-boiled egg that had burst open.

“This woman has information,” he said. It sounded as if two broken metal rods were rubbing together. His voice modulation was failing. “Do what she says.”

Quiniu immediately knelt down beside the blond woman. She was rolling back and forth, coughing heavily. Bloody foam formed on her lips. Quiniu held her tightly until she calmed down.

“Rico says you have information,” she said sharply. “What kind of information?”

The woman blinked. Tears ran down her cheeks.

“Answer me!”

“The intruders are coming,” Rico said in his metallic voice. “Hurry!”

“I know,” the young woman said, her voice extremely weak, “where Rico should look in order to find what he is seeking.”

“What is he seeking?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“How can you know where he should look if you don’t know what he’s looking for?”

The woman gasped. “My talent... I just know. I can fe...feel it.”

Rico suddenly lifted both his arms. Energy volleys shot down the corridor from where they had come. Somewhere someone was screaming shrilly. Shots rang out.

“Where do we have to go?”

“Down... Down the corridor. A...storeroom.”

Quiniu grabbed the young woman and threw her over her shoulder. The strength enhancers in her suit helped, and she hardly noticed the weight.

“Rico!” she called out. “Follow us!”

She started the flight module and took off carrying her burden, checking several times to make sure the robot was following.

Rico’s movement apparatus was in a pretty bad state, and Quiniu mentally prepared herself for the idea that she might have to carry him as well.

They came to the first fork in the corridor. Just as she had expected, the young woman whispered directions, telling her to turn left. At the next fork, they went to the right. Seconds later they were standing in the storeroom that she had visited with Rico once. Where the arch-like *thing* stood.

Rico entered. He was swaying from side to side, and then his hips fell apart. The robot collapsed with a crashing sound.

“Rico!” she called out. “Tell me what I should do now!”

The robot’s jaws were moving. She could hear a grinding sound. Words.

“Usque huc venies et non procedes plus ultra,” she heard, “et hic confringes tumentes fluctus tuos.”

“What did you say? What does that mean?”

Rico did not answer. The woman in her arms was sobbing. Quiniu laid her gently on the floor.

“Listen to me carefully,” she said urgently. “I need to know how or where I must continue to look. What do you know?”

The woman tried to look at her, but her gaze slipped away every time, and her eyes rolled in their sockets. “I don’t...know that,” she stammered. “Only this far... No farther.”

Quiniu stood up, determined. “Station positronic!” she called loudly. “I need your support! *Rico* needs your help!”

She waited for a second or two, but the positronic remained silent. Everyone was silent.

“Perfect,” she muttered. “Just perfect. Holy Regent.”

She turned to the arch. She could feel that this strange apparatus had something to do with the solution to their problem. What had the station positronic said before?

I can inform you of his last location.

Rico had either sought his master, his builder, or another contact or important person. And that person had obviously disappeared with the help of this arch.

She heard voices at her back and steps that were getting louder.

There was a kind of terminal attached to the right side of the arch. She pressed a few of the contacts arbitrarily. Suddenly the machine came to life with a humming sound. A deep black, billowing field manifested itself inside the arch.

Quiniu took two steps back and looked at what she had done. The field appeared to be a pit with no bottom and reminded her of

the strange feeling she got whenever she had to place her trust in a badly lit anti-grav shaft.

Where did this gateway lead? To another dimension? Or was she gravely mistaken and it was nothing more than a particularly large trash chute that disintegrated everything that entered the field?

The steps grew louder. Someone was barking orders in an Asian dialect. But there was another voice in between, a voice that seemed to be full of panic.

Quiniu glanced back. The intruders had not yet discovered the storeroom. What should she do? Her way back to the recon craft was cut off. While they did not possess battledresses, the energy weapon attachments on their weapons made them just as dangerous, which had been Rico's downfall.

Would they shoot if she took off her suit and presented herself, defenseless, to them? She certainly could not rule it out. During the days she had been on Earth, she had seen too many atrocities to have much faith in the humans, who were capable of anything in her opinion.

However, she could also take the woman hostage. Perhaps that would keep them from shooting blindly at her. Or she could look for another way out. A second, perhaps hidden airlock? A station like this surely had to have an emergency exit. She could grab Rico and begin the long journey to the surface of the ocean.

Would the suit's energy be sufficient to maintain the protective shield against the enormous pressure for long? But what use would it be for her to make all that effort to reach the surface and then have the suit give up the ghost on her? She would be stranded once again, and her options even more limited than ever before.

And then? Continue hiding from the governments who wanted to catch her? Or end up as Besun for the Fantan? No.

No!

Since leaving the *Aetron* behind her, she felt more alive than ever

before. She had proven—if only to herself—that she could find solutions on her own.

She looked into the bottomless pit. She had survived this far—she would also survive this field. Somehow.

Steps, voices. They were here! Only a few seconds and then they would burst in with their energy weapons.

Quiniu bent down, grabbed the robot, and dragged him to the black field. The intruders stormed the room. Somebody yelled something, a voice raised in panic.

With the help of the strength amplifiers in the joints of the suit, she threw the robot like a ragdoll into the blackness. Without looking at where he had gone, she bent down and lifted up the blond woman.

Only then did she look towards the entrance to the storeroom. A man was standing there. He did not look like a soldier. His face was red, and he had lifted both arms sideways to block the way of those coming behind him. Uniformed arms pulled and grabbed at him, but he stood there, solid as a rock.

Quiniu pulled the grenade out of her belt pocket and held it up high so that he could see it. “One step farther,” she called in English, “and I’ll let it explode!”

She walked slowly backwards. She could not leave the woman behind. The human *knew* something. Soptor did not understand how she could have figured out the connection between Rico and the arch machine, but if it really was a machine that could transport them to somewhere else, this woman could be of invaluable assistance.

Only a few steps lay between her and the field. She could tangibly feel it billowing behind her.

Caroline Frank

She forgot her pain, her fear. “Paps,” she wheezed, “be careful.”

Her father was standing in the entrance, defending it against the soldiers who wanted to storm the storeroom.

“Let her go!” he called out. Suddenly his voice did not sound as panicked as it had before. It wasquiet. Determined. “She has done nothing to you!”

Caroline felt the unknown woman pulling her in the direction of the strange black field that, at first glance, reminded her of an endlessly deep well. Her father ran towards her.

“Nein, Paps, nicht!” Caroline blurted out.

Her sixty-five-year-old father came running towards her faster than she had ever seen him run in his life. His face was rigid in a mask of determination, his lips pressed so tightly together that they looked like two white lines.

Caroline tried to defend herself against the claw-like grip with which the woman held her fast, but she could not match the alien’s strength. With the last bit of energy she could muster, she turned around as far as she could and said, “I know...what you’re looking for. I can feel it.”

Caroline felt her opponent stiffen. The black abyss of the well shaft spread out behind them.

“What?” the woman said. She hesitated.

At that moment, Caroline felt herself being grabbed by two other hands.

“Let her go!” she heard her father’s voice screaming.

Caroline saw two eyes wide open behind the mirrored visor of the helmet. The irises were silver. She lost her balance and the three of them stumbled towards the blackness.

“Life,” Caroline said. “You are looking for life. It is behind you. We’re about to tumble into it.”

She saw the silver eyes narrow. Then the woman loosened her

viselike grip and let go. She fell into the shaft and was swallowed up by it.

Caroline stretched out her arms. She too was about to sink into the darkness. What had Rico said in Latin? *Come this far and no farther. Your proud waves should lay down here.* A slightly modified quote from the Vulgata.

Now she too would disappear into the black waves. She suddenly felt very light. Very free.

"Damn!" her father called out.

Caroline smiled. *Mr Grumpy.* Does he have to ruin this moment? She closed her eyes.

And then she felt herself whirling round. She immediately opened her eyes again and was no longer falling towards the field but slammed hard against the machine column with her father.

Something cracked. She heard another noise—the sound of metal hitting the floor.

"That damned woman," her father yelled.

Caroline saw that the grenade the woman had threatened them with before had fallen to the floor and was rolling towards them. Cursing, her father turned around, lifted her in his strong arms, and ran for the exit.

Then the world around them exploded. The last thing she saw was her father's face, looking at her tenderly.

Then the light came.

20.

Tako Kakuta

Prison camp, Ferrolia

They had allowed themselves a day to recharge and recover from the physical and emotional shocks they had experienced. Ferrons brought them food and drinks that they had received from the guards through supply hatches.

Tako Kakuta and Anne Sloane hadn't spoken a single word to each other the entire time. He was no longer against the idea of escape. For the first time since their crash, he felt his strength coming back.

All the while, there were increased signs that something was being cooked up among the prisoners. Hermot had told them they were planning a revolt against the guards. The appearance of the Topsidan with the eye-patch had shown them the lizard-people were becoming careless. It was an opportunity the prisoners wanted to make use of.

That meant the humans had to be fast. If there was a revolt, the Topsidians might suddenly deactivate the energy shield in order to kill the prisoners all at once. They had to avoid that happening at all costs.

It was Daria Morozova who was the first to come up with an escape plan. None of them had anything against it, and the plan was accepted.

Kakuta took her hand and jumped to the freight room with her. She needed half an hour to find out that the Topsidans were sitting together in a separate room, engrossed in a game of cards.

They then rushed back to the freight room and inspected every single container. To Kakuta's amazement, Morozova had already learned a little of the lizards' language, and she managed to decipher several of their written characters.

“Here!” she whispered. “This container is intended for Pigell, the sixth planet of Vega.”

Kakuta looked around, but none of the guards appeared. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll jump inside and see whether the container is suitable for our purposes!”

He concentrated and teleported, immediately banging against something hard, causing a sharp pain to shoot through his body.

Keep going, little squid, he thought to himself. *Be tough and supple at the same time!*

He felt his way through the darkness. He could feel barrels, canisters in different sizes, pots, and sacks. He realized the container was big enough to transport Deringhouse, Morozova, Sloane and himself. But could he manage to jump in with someone else when it already caused him pain and a great deal of effort on his own?

He teleported back to the former cosmonaut and told her of his reservations.

“We’ll find a solution for that,” she answered. “Go on, bring the others while the air is still clear!”

Kakuta nodded and jumped. He was immediately standing next to Deringhouse and Sloane.

“Did anyone see us?” he asked.

Deringhouse said no while Sloane kept her lips tightly shut and said nothing.

“Then let’s go!”

He took their hands—feeling strange holding Anne’s—and teleported back to the Russian.

“What about freshwater, hygiene articles, and the two empty buckets I asked you to get?” Morozova asked.

“Coming right up,” he murmured.

He jumped back again and fetched the things they would need for their time in the container. He returned to his companions, heavily loaded. He felt his energy waning again.

“This container is heading for Pigell,” the former cosmonaut told them. “Anne, can you open the seal and lock?”

“Can Tako not just teleport us in?”

“No,” Morozova replied. “It’s too full. A jump could be very dangerous.”

Sloane said nothing more. She approached the seal, looked at it for a while, and then it burst open.

“That was step one,” the telekinetic said. “Now for step two.”

She placed her hand on the lock. Nothing happened for about half a minute. Kakuta glanced nervously towards the corridor that led to the separate room where the guards were. If they came out now, their plan to escape Ferrolia as stowaways would be foiled.

Then they heard a quiet clicking sound.

“Ha!” Sloane said triumphantly. She grabbed the handle and pulled open the door to the container, glancing briefly inside. “We’ll never fit in there!” she complained in a harsh whisper.

“Can’t you create a little space?” Deringhouse asked.

Sloane sighed. Then several barrels and canisters started moving around as if ghostly hands were at work, ultimately landing behind a pile of other containers.

“That should be good enough for now,” Morozova said. “Quick, get inside…”

They heard footsteps.

“Inside!” Kakuta hissed.

The four humans grabbed their equipment and jumped into the container. Kakuta remained standing at the door, closing it from within. “Anne!” he said urgently, “you have to lock the container and close the seal again!”

“Don’t order me around! I know what I have to do!” a threatening voice said from the darkness.

Kakuta held his breath. They could no longer hear the footsteps of the guards from the inside the container. He knew, however, that they must have already entered the freight room. He suddenly heard a quiet “click.”

“The container is locked,” Sloane whispered. “And the seal was child’s play. What now?”

“We wait,” Morozova replied.

21.

Bernhard Frank

The underwater dome,

August 2, 2036

“How do you feel, Mister Frank?” Mercant asked.

“Not good,” Bernhard answered. “As if I was just run over by a bus.”

Mercant smiled sourly. It sounded as if he had not survived his collision with the hangar wall without a few bruises and aching joints.

“That was stupid of you,” the small man said to him disapprovingly. “Your opponent could have shot you. You never approach someone who has a hostage in their arms.”

“She wanted to enter that field with Caro. I had to do something.”

Mercant smiled. “And something you did. I will recommend you to Rhodan as an expert for special uses.”

Bernhard forced himself to smile back. “Please don’t. I think I would much rather live my untroubled life as a wealthy man in Bavaria than face this kind of stress.”

He Jian-Dong, the former adjutant, stepped up to Mercant. “We have treated his daughter’s burns to such an extent that she can now be transported.”

“Will she ever regain her health?” Bernhard asked.

“We were initially worried about her lung,” the soldier answered. “But you can rest assured it is not as bad as it looks.”

“We have a couple of excellent doctors in Terrania,” Mercant

said, noticing the horrified look on Bernhard's face. "I'm sure they will be able to treat the burns very well."

"One of our men will now transport you with in barracuda to São Miguel. From there a copter will bring you back to Terrania."

"Thank you!"

Jian-Dong nodded and withdrew. Mercant helped Frank to stand up and accompanied him to the waiting barracuda. Caroline was already lying in one of the two hammocks there. Despite the shrapnel in his back, Bernhard wanted to travel back to the surface in one of the bucket seats.

Worried, he stroked Caroline's cheek with his hand. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

Her head was bandaged. Her left cheek had a plastopack sticking to it, which supplied the burnt flesh with moisture and substances that promoted the healing process.

She smiled weakly. "Mr...Grumpy."

"You shouldn't call me that. I'm Papa." He quickly wiped his eyes. He didn't want her to see the tears of relief there.

Mercant came over to them. "I know that you're not feeling so great, Miss Frank. But may I just ask you one important question? Do you know what or who Rico and his companion were looking for in the station?"

Caroline gently moved her head from side to side. "No...sir. Something...somebody. I didn't...find out."

Mercant nodded. "Thank you. If you happen to remember any other details, please contact Mr. Marshall in Terrania." He turned to Bernhard. "I'm going to inspect the station and all the damage. Unfortunately, it fared worse from the explosion than you. It seems to me that not only the Lederhosen are indestructible in Bavaria."

Bernhard had to laugh out loud. "I would still advise you not to have any protective suits made out of deerskin."

“I will at least think about it.” Mercant held out his right hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mister Frank. It would be nice to see you again in Terrania once I’m finished here.”

Frank took his hand and shook it. “I don’t see that happening very soon, Mister Mercant. However, as I know how stubborn my daughter is, she will remain in Terrania, so I will very likely be visiting now and again.”

“I certainly hope you do.”

Mercant said goodbye to Caroline and hurried out of the airlock. Bernhard dropped onto the very soft upholstery of the bucket seat with a groan. The Chinese pilot sat down and indicated to him that he should put on his belt.

The airlock closed, and water rushed in. Minutes later they were gliding through the darkness of the underwater world.

What adventurous times we live in, Bernhard thought to himself. Then he turned to the driver. “Have you ever heard of the experts for special uses? Do you know how fit you have to be to get accepted?”

22.

Reginald Bull

Arsene Lupin

A strong tractor beam encompassed the *Arsene Lupin* and pulled it mercilessly in the direction of the space station. Bull was almost certain that this station was the mysterious *Myranar* Skelir had spoken about.

Sue had woken up, and Sid had recovered sufficiently from his exertions, making him able to stand next to Bull and Manoli without requiring support. Silently, they watched the ships that were now accompanying them at the end of their escape.

He looked into the pale face of Sid González, who was taking the bad news with surprising equanimity. Then the tractor beam set them down on a platform. A bell-shaped shield that looked like a shimmering silk curtain was placed over them. An energy shield.

Dozens of flounder-like Fantan spaceships penetrated the shield and landed on the platform. The cylindrical beings got out of the many ships, and there were soon several hundred of them.

The crowd divided before the *Arsene Lupin*. This formed a corridor that led to a menacing-looking open door on the space station. The Fantan lifted their skinny arms, moving them rhythmically as if they could all hear the same music, a gesture that only they understood.

“Let’s go,” Bull said, composed. “Let’s look destiny in the eye!”

They left the ship. And, as it turned out, the Fantan were singing. Bull didn’t understand a single word.

They walked slowly down the walkway four abreast. Manoli supported Sue, while Sid held on to Bull’s left shoulder.

What on Earth is going on here? he asked himself.

It reminded him of photos he had seen from the twentieth century when the first astronauts had landed on the moon and were greeted enthusiastically upon their return by huge crowds packed into the streets in between the skyscrapers of New York. What a strange and surreal comparison! And yet it seemed appropriate.

At some point they were able to hear individual words and sentences from the staccato singing of the cylindrical beings.

"Besun!"

"How strong and cunning they are!"

"They very nearly escaped!"

"Fantastic Besun!"

"Valuable Besun!"

"Have you ever seen such wonderful Besun?"

"We must preserve it well."

"Our Besun."

Bull felt numb, both inside and out, as he finally entered the interior of the space station. Bulky robots received them, leading them along winding corridors deeper inside. A shimmering wall built itself up behind them, and it continued to follow them every step of the way. Another energy shield. The Fantan must have found out that the boy who could disappear in a cloud of sparks was powerless against the force fields.

They reached a room filled with dim light. The robots left them standing before disappearing down the corridor in the direction they had come from. Another energy shield emerged and blended with the wall.

"Well, that's us," Reginald Bull said, resigned. "In a high-security prison with several layers of energy shields."

Sue scratched the stump of her arm, then squeezed her eyes

closed as if she suddenly had a headache. “There’s something here,” she said. “Something alien. A... A...”

Sid also touched his head. “I can feel it as well. It...wants to get into my thoughts.”

Bull saw a movement in the semi-darkness. He stood protectively in front of the two youngsters. Manoli followed suit.

“Who are you?” Bull called out. “Stop what you’re doing and come here!”

A shadow removed itself from the twilight and came towards them. It didn’t seem to be very big, perhaps a meter tall, but Bull immediately felt threatened by it.

The being remained standing. Bull squeezed his eyes together, but he could not see anything more than a silhouette.

“Who are you?” a strangely high voice asked. It spoke perfect English!

Bull swallowed. He had a sharp answer on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t say it. He found this creature to be the spookiest thing he had ever encountered.

“We are Besun of the Fantan,” he said cautiously. He saw no reason to reveal more to this unknown figure than was necessary. “We come from Earth...from Terra.”

“I see,” it answered.

Bull finally felt fury rise within him, and it felt good, giving him a feeling of security. “Come on, show yourself!” he called out.

The being seemed to be thinking about whether to comply with Bull’s order or not. Then it started moving slowly. Bull held his breath.

More and more details peeled out of the shadows. Round ears, brown fur, a pointed nose...two arms, two short legs...and a flat tail that dragged along the floor. Bull swallowed the lump that had

formed in his throat. The creature reminded him of a cross between a mouse and beaver. If he had seen it somewhere in the woods, he would have never have thought for a second that it wasn't an animal before him.

But this was no animal. Its eyes were large, and they shone with intelligence…and a great deal more. Bull could not shake off the feeling of an acute threat.

"You want to know who I am?" the creature asked. Individual teeth flashed in its mouth. "Most people call me Saviour of the Universe, but you—as my fellow Besun—can just call me Gucky!"

TO BE CONTINUED…